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**Dissertation Thesis**

**2024**

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**Catalysts of Conflict: Theorizing the Study of  
Geopolitical Flashpoints**

Dissertation Thesis

Praha 2024

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Year of the defense: 2024

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on  
**July 10, 2024**

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## References

Lavengood, Zachary. *Catalysts of Conflict: Theorizing the Study of Geopolitical Flashpoints*. Praha, 2024. Dissertation thesis (Ph.D.). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of International Studies, Department of North American Studies. Supervisor PhDr. Jan Hornát, Ph.D.

**Length of the Thesis: 374,352 characters with spaces**

## **Abstract**

This dissertation delves into the complex realm of geopolitical flashpoints, offering an in-depth analysis that bridges theoretical constructs with practical application. Through an exploration of the intricate dynamics of geopolitical tensions, this study unveils the underlying mechanisms that transform disputes between states into flashpoints—social phenomena in international relations that have the potential to escalate into kinetic conflicts. By employing a novel approach grounded in the Copenhagen School, particularly its concepts of securitization and Regional Security Complex Theory, the research illuminates how these flashpoints are not only constructed phenomena with traceable causal chains, but also inherently regional issues that necessitate a nuanced understanding of regional versus global dynamics. The dissertation further introduces a typology of flashpoints and a diagnostic to provide a structured framework to examine their formation, durability, and potential pathways towards de-escalation or conflict. Through detailed case studies of the Arctic and the South China Sea, it illustrates the diverse spectrum of flashpoint volatility, highlighting the role of political rhetoric, military posturing, and diplomatic efforts in shaping the discourse and outcomes of these critical geopolitical junctions. The findings not only enhance the academic discourse on international relations and conflict resolution, but also offer strategic insights for policymakers aimed at mitigating tensions and fostering peace. This work underscores the significance of understanding flashpoints in preventing escalations and contributing to a more stable international order.

## **Abstrakt**

Tato disertační práce se zabývá komplexní oblastí geopolitických ohnisek napětí a nabízí hloubkovou analýzu, která propojuje teoretické koncepty s praktickým využitím. Prostřednictvím zkoumání dynamiky geopolitického napětí tato studie odhaluje mechanismy, které jsou základem pro přeměnu sporů mezi státy v tzv. geopolitická ohniska (flashpoints) - jevy v mezinárodních vztazích, které mají potenciál přerůst v kinetické konflikty. Za použití nového přístupu založeného na Kodaňské škole, zejména na jejích konceptech sekuritizace a teorii regionálního bezpečnostního komplexu, tato práce ukazuje, že geopolitická ohniska jsou nejen konstruovanými jevy s výsledovatelnými kauzálními řetězci, ale také inherentně regionálními problémy, které vyžadují citlivé porozumění regionální a globální dynamice. Disertační práce dále zavádí typologii ohnisek

napětí a diagnostiku, která poskytuje strukturovaný rámec pro zkoumání jejich vzniku, trvání a potenciálních cest k deeskalaci nebo konfliktu. Prostřednictvím podrobných případových studií Arktidy a Jihočínského moře ilustruje různorodé spektrum volatility ohnisek napětí a zdůrazňuje roli politické rétoriky, vojenských postojů a diplomatického úsilí při utváření diskurzu a výsledků těchto kritických geopolitických střetů. Zjištění nejen obohacují akademický diskurz o mezinárodních vztazích a řešení konfliktů, ale nabízejí také strategické poznatky pro tvůrce politik zaměřené na zmírnění napětí a podporu míru. Tato práce zdůrazňuje význam pochopení ohnisek konfliktů pro předcházení eskalaci a přispění ke stabilnějšímu mezinárodnímu uspořádání.

### **Keywords**

Flashpoints, securitization, Copenhagen School, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Arctic, South China Sea

### **Klíčová slova**

Geopolitická ohniska, sekuritizace, Kodaňská škola, teorie regionálního bezpečnostního komplexu (RSCT), Arktida, Jihočínské moře.

### **Title**

Catalysts of Conflict: Theorizing the Study of Geopolitical Flashpoints

### **Název práce**

Katalyzátory konfliktu: Teoretizace studia geopolitických ohnisek

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all who helped me finish this dissertation:  
First to Dr. Jan Hornát, whose mentorship guided this entire process and whose tireless  
patience reading countless drafts and resolute composure listening to hours of half-cooked  
ideas has seen this work from inception to defense, Děkuju vám.

To 이삿별, 당신의 사랑과 애정은 매우 귀중합니다. 당신 없이는 이 일을 끝낼 수  
없었을 것입니다.

To my chingus, wherever you may be, your support and friendship have kept me going for  
so many years, thank you, gracias, bedankt, takk, 감사합니다, Рахмат, danke.

To all other friends and family, thank you.



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# 1 Introduction

Across the world-system, foci of geopolitical tensions form as disputes between actors solidify into durable social phenomena: *flashpoints*. Though the term is used regularly by policy makers and in media to refer to heating relations between states, often to denote a precarious circumstance which could lead to conflict, there is little scholarly engagement with the term and even less theoretical assessment done on *flashpoints* as facets of international relations. The deficit of a structured understanding of the phenomena has led to a polysemic definition which changes in nuance with each use, this is problematic due to the connotations which come with a dispute being labeled a flashpoint and the potential for a mis-labeling inadvertently raising tensions. This dissertation offers an in-depth analysis of these phenomena and develops a typology of geopolitical flashpoints which permits the examination of the intricate processes by which friction between states evolves, the nature of flashpoints once they emerge, and the pathways towards conflict or peace.

In an era marked by complex global challenges, from territorial disputes to hybrid warfare, and the yet-to-be understood secondary effects from climate change, the ability to identify and analyze flashpoints before they escalate into kinetic conflict is paramount. This dissertation provides a framework to assess the potential volatility of geopolitical disputes, guiding more informed and strategic decision-making processes. The insights derived from this study have the potential to contribute to the development of preventive diplomacy, mediation and conflict resolution strategies, aiming to mitigate tensions and foster international peace and stability. This study aims to bridge the gap between academic research and practical application of the flashpoints idea by elucidating the mechanisms through which states engage in the securitization process and the evolution of tension ratcheting during disputes. This research also offers a deeper

understanding of the interplay between political rhetoric, military posturing, and diplomatic efforts which shape flashpoints and direct them down pathways of de-escalation or conflict.

This dissertation's research questions center on uncovering the nature of geopolitical flashpoints and the interactions between states involved in these phenomena. It applies an interdisciplinary lens to the research gap to generate holistic findings: from the field of Security Studies it draws from the Copenhagen School's constructive-realist ideas of securitization through speech acts by political communities, and Regional Security Complex Theory's (RSCT) emphasis on the political-security dynamics of states in geographic proximity; from the Social Psychology literature the dissertation utilizes findings from studies of crowd disorder to make parallels between micro (crowds) and macro (state) human collectives' thought patterns during times of escalated tensions between themselves and an opposing force. The unique application of these fields in synergy offers an opportunity to explore flashpoints from an Archimedean point and uncover the mechanics of these phenomena, both by way of how flashpoints develop as well as their trajectories. Specifically, this dissertation answers the questions: Do individual flashpoints have identifiable pathways towards de-escalation or conflict, or are they purely stochastic in nature? And, concerning methodology, how does approaching flashpoints from a constructivist school of thought offer deeper insights on the phenomenon as opposed to traditional action-reaction realist thinking?

The dissertation begins its study by describing its theoretical and methodological framework, which is rooted in the constructivist Copenhagen School of international relations and its applications of securitization and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). When synthesized in analysis, these two frameworks provide the necessary scope to elucidate the human and geopolitical factors which constitute flashpoints and underpin two key assertions: that flashpoints

are constructed phenomenon, and therefore have traceable casual chains which lead to their inception, durability, and ignition or dissolution; and that flashpoints are fundamentally regional issues, and are best appreciated in light of regional, rather than global dynamics.

Next, the dissertation describes flashpoints as social phenomenon and introduces a typology of flashpoints for the academic and civil communities. It begins with a review of the scant available literature which has been produced surrounding flashpoints as units of study, highlighting both their strengths as well as their shortcomings. Afterward, a typology is formed which consists of the disputes under which flashpoints form, the drivers which perpetuate them, and key issues which define them. The chapter closes with a ‘diagnostic’ to disaggregate and identify flashpoints from the stable disputes which constitute a functioning multilateral world-system.

Following this is a chapter which dichotomizes flashpoints into categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ volatility, characterizing the differing dynamics of flashpoints in relation to their place on a spectrum of volatility which indicates a likelihood of ignition. As flashpoints move down this spectrum and become more volatile, there are identifiable shifts in the discourse between the states involved as well as the type and tone of actions they take with one another. Elucidating the characteristics of both categories, especially flashpoints of high volatility, is critical, as the casual chains which lead to flashpoint ignition are not immutable and identifying a flashpoint on the precipice of ignition can act as an impetus for crisis diplomacy and trust-building. This chapter is bookended by contemporary examples of both categories of flashpoints.

The dissertation then employs two case studies to operationalize both the typology of flashpoints, as well as provide contemporary examples of high and low volatility flashpoints. First, the Arctic is described as a low volatility flashpoint which is driven by a collapse in ‘Arctic exceptionalism’

following the outset of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War, a budding arms race between Arctic states, and Russian socio-economic threat perceptions. Next, the South China Sea is presented as a high volatility flashpoint on the far end of the spectrum where the potential for kinetic conflict is salient, being driven by a complexity interlinking issues including contradictory maritime claims, assertions of regional hegemony by China, and resource extraction rights.

This work's theorization of flashpoints as geopolitical phenomenon enhances the field of international relations by providing context to a widely discussed, yet poorly defined subject matter. Through addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats, it hopes to foster multidisciplinary dialogue and advance academic discourse on conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

## **2 Flashpoint inception – The Copenhagen School and Securitization**

Conflict is not spontaneous; each instance arises from traceable patterns of enmity which themselves can be unraveled into more basic units of interactions between states for analysis.

While each conflict and preceding pattern of enmity is unique, generalizations and theories can be distilled and aggregated with others to form a broader understanding of flashpoint emergence as a phenomenon. The process by which issues of contention between states evolves from disagreement to enmity, and from enmity to conflict is a key facet of international relations as both a field of academia as well as in the practical sense in the art of diplomacy; equally as important is understanding the converse: how and why do states de-escalate from patterns of enmity and conflict. This chapter examines how disputes between states turn into geopolitical flashpoints through the lens of the Copenhagen School and its concept of 'securitization', and how these flashpoints are best appreciated as regional phenomenon.

## 2.1 The Copenhagen School

Within the field of international relations, a number of theories offer their own explanations for security, from the self-help and anarchical system of Realism(s)<sup>1</sup>, to Marxist interpretations of class and economic driven geopolitics<sup>2</sup>, and Liberal notions of a breakdown in the rules-based order.<sup>3</sup> In the years surrounding the end of the Cold War, which was hallmarked with grand narratives of global security, new ideas of conceptualizing international relations began to emerge which broadened the understanding of security. This included a shift in the focus of reference, among other advances, from a global lens to one of regional security issues which highlighted the state-state interactions between localized groups as the primary driver of international relations. A key proponent of this new focus was, and remains, the Copenhagen School of international relations. Rooted in the constructivist approach, the School emphasizes norms, ideas, and human agency in the creation of the political world as being of equal importance to material factors. Security, the Copenhagen School argues, cannot be defined in purely objective or subjective terms which would align with 20th century's Realism or Liberalism, rather, security is a *mélange* of both the objective and the subjective creating a *gestalt* which forms a clearer picture of reality.

The school was founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the waning years of the Cold War around scholars associated with the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute; the most prominent of which were, and still remain to be, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. The School posited, as many

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<sup>1</sup> Such as the hegemony-focused Offensive Realism developed in John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) and the balance-focused Defensive Realism developed by Kenneth Walt's *Theory of International Politics* (1979)

<sup>2</sup> Such as Machael Hardt and Antonio Negri's loquacious tome *Empire* (2000), or Immanuel Wallerstein's more approachable World-Systems analysis (2001) which approach security through ideas of exploitation of weaker powers and the axial division of labor.

<sup>3</sup> Such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's *Power and Interdependence* (2012) which attributes conflict between states to faults in complex interdependencies in the international system

new lines of thinking at the time did as well, that traditional understandings of security, such as the various Realist, Liberal, and Marxist interpretations, were unable to provide satisfactory explanations for contemporary developments in international relations and looked to provide more critical, nuanced analysis which challenged these accepted norms. These perspectives highlighted what were perceived to be acute deficits in traditionalist thinking on security: issues of gender and race, development and geography, speech and discourse, among many others which added color to the mosaic of security studies which for decades had been simplistically shaded from the palette of conventional theories.

The School's approach to security is in many ways aligned with other Constructivist conceptions which attribute the underpinnings of security, such as threat perception and creation, to the subjective interactions between actors rather than inherent notions of survival of the fittest in the international arena. However, this is not to allude that the Copenhagen School is a purely Constructivist line of thinking, as the School draws from many different theories and schools of thought to create its outlook on security affairs. While its Constructivist roots emphasizes language, discourse, and subjectivity of action, it also reaffirms Realist ideas regarding sovereignty and zero-sum thinking, Liberal ideas of international order and the interplay of states in the contemporary world-system, as well as poststructuralist ideas of discursive structures and reimagining the 'givens' of traditional security concepts.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Copenhagen School's synergy of different theories on international relations is one of its strongest assets, as it allows its applicants the opportunity to view security from a multi-dimensional lens to distill useful analysis while maintaining sufficient theoretical rigidity to avoid the pitfall of 'everything is

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<sup>4</sup> (Filimon 2016, 51-53)



security'. Filimon (2016) identified three main themes which are at play in the Copenhagen School:

1: The expansion of security beyond conventional understandings of the concept. Importantly the sectorization of security into five areas- military, political, economic, societal, and environmental. These reflect specific relationships (in the same order as above):

-Relationships of forceful coercion

-Relationships of authority, governing status, and recognition

-Relationships of collective identity

-Relationships between human activity and the planetary biosphere<sup>5</sup>

2: The state-based process of identifying “security threats” that tend to vary and be socially constructed. This theme aligns with Constructivist ideas of discourse, rather than tangible and material concerns, driving security between states. This idea takes its shape most prominently in Regional Security Complex Theory, a product of the Copenhagen School which is described in greater detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

3: Securitization. While described in detail in the following section, securitization can be summarized as “a securitizing actor [...] uses a particular discourse, referred to as a ‘speech act’ to represent a particular issue to an audience as an existential threat to the security of the referent object”.<sup>6</sup>

The Copenhagen School is not without its critics, which range from the obvious critiques from more traditionalist schools, to criticism from other critical schools of thought within the field of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p 54

<sup>6</sup> (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, Security: A New Framework for Analysis 1998, 23-26)

security studies. One of the most comprehensive critiques comes from Matt McDonald who argues that the School's approach and its application of securitization is too narrow on three important levels:

1. Form- that the Copenhagen School focuses on dominant political/state level actors speech acts while generally (in McDonald's view) ignoring images and materiel factors from non-state/leadership groups
2. Context- a focus on the moment of securitization rather than the development of security construction over longer periods of time.
3. Nature- that the Copenhagen School's idea of securitization is defined through the perception of threats to security which (in McDonald's view) conceptualizes security politics as reactionary.<sup>7</sup>

Lene Hansen (2000) raises similar criticisms with McDonald's first level, namely that the Copenhagen School and securitization overlook "silent security dilemmas" from marginalized groups who do not have, if at all, a similar capacity to voice security concerns as political actors. She specifically points to the absence of gender, religion, and other aspects of identity in the School's analysis of threats in what she dubs 'security as silence' and 'subsuming security':

*'Security as silence' occurs when insecurity cannot be voiced, when raising something as a security problem is impossible or might even aggravate the threat being faced. 'Subsuming security' arises because gendered security problems often involve an intimate inter-linkage between the subject's gendered identity and other aspects of the subject's identity, for example national and religious. As a consequence, 'gender' rarely produces the kind of collective, self-contained referent objects required by the Copenhagen School, and to the extent that gender is included it is mostly as an individual—and less important—security problem.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> (McDonald 2008)

<sup>8</sup> (Hansen 2000)

Reinforcing a theme in criticism of the Copenhagen School, Ken Booth (2005) critiques the School for being too state-, elite-, and discourse-centric and does not appreciate the security concerns of what he calls “real people in real places”. As well, Booth gives the School a dose of backhanded flattery for “broadening the [research] agenda” but being “basically a neorealist perspective”.<sup>9</sup>

These criticisms, while accurate to a degree, fall short in two important areas:

1. In regard to the criticism of the absence of insights regarding identity, these authors fail to appreciate the scope of the Copenhagen School, in that the school of thought is not attempting to holistically detail all aspects of security/threats. The School (and more broadly the idea of securitization) is intended for the analysis of state level security issues rather than societal security/justice and the representation of marginal groups in threat creation/perception. Securitizing issues stemming from societal factors are acknowledged in *Regions and Powers* in the possibility of “other units [groups] or levels might establish themselves as referent objects for security.”<sup>10</sup> However this is intended to highlight non-state groups such as terror organizations, separatist groups, etc.<sup>11</sup> The School is state-centric by design rather than defect, and is a means to investigate the relations and grand strategy between states and other international actors; while it is indeed the place of researchers and adherents of critical theories of political science and international relations to point out shortcomings or oversights in the theories of others, this is an instance of critiquing a fish for its lack of wings.

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<sup>9</sup> (Booth 2005, 14-15, 259-278)

<sup>10</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 70-71)

<sup>11</sup> Indeed being written in 2003, *Regions and Powers* discusses in depth the impact that non-state actors (especially terror groups) can have on wider global geopolitics.

2. Related to Booth's criticism: the presence of neorealist perspectives in the School should not be taken as a regression rather than an advancement in the understanding of international relations. While the School is placed in the categories of constructivist and (or) critical, the School's insistence of applicability in real-world analysis demands that it appreciate and incorporate traditional schools of international relations as well. This can be traced to the key ideas of the School which look at securitization and other geopolitical maneuvers as state-led endeavors, these states by-in-large take realist perspectives in their grand strategy and diplomatic efforts with other states. This is addressed in Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde's 1998 book "Security- A New Framework for Analysis":

*The analyst in critical security studies takes on a larger burden than the analyst in our approach; he or she can brush away existing security construction disclosed as arbitrary and point to some other issues that are more important security problems. Our approach links itself more closely to existing actors, tries to understand their modus operandi, and assumes that future management of security will have to include handling these actors—as, for instance, in strategies aimed at mitigating security dilemmas and fostering mutual awareness in security complexes. Although our philosophical position is in some sense more radically constructivist in holding security to always be a political construction and not something the analyst can describe as it “really” is, in our purposes we are closer to traditional security studies, which at its best attempted to grasp security constellations and thereby steer them into benign interactions. This stands in contrast to the “critical” purposes of CSS, which point toward a more wholesale refutation of current power wielders.<sup>12</sup>*

This second point of rebuttal was an important factor in the decision to apply the Copenhagen School's theories to this work. This flexibility in analysis, to appreciate the Constructive nature of international relations as an observer while understanding the Realist tendencies of actors in

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<sup>12</sup> (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, Security: A New Framework for Analysis 1998, 35)

the maneuvers of geopolitics, gives a unique perspective which is able to rise above (1) the tendency at times for critical theories to get stuck in the weeds of identity and over-deconstructing, and (2) view international relations as more than the Newtonian social physics of the traditionalist action-reaction geopolitics. While earlier iterations of the Copenhagen School could have benefited from an acknowledgement of underlying critical factors (such as identity) which push political actors to make the speech acts of securitization, in later clarifications of the School's line of thinking, such as after Buzan and Wæver's 2003 book *Regions and Powers*, the need to address these issues loses impetus in appreciation of the School's analytical goals. Regarding other schools of thought, this should not be considered a chide in their importance, as they do elucidate many issues which are overlooked in traditional theories. However, in line with Buzan and Wæver's thinking, no one school of thought will act as a panacea for all questions of security, international relations, or politics, despite the efforts of some authors and thinkers to assert such absolutes. Picking the tool which is best for the job, rather than trying to use a wrench as a hammer, is a more effective means of furthering our understanding of the social world around us. As Buzan and Wæver state in a 1997 article answering hefty criticisms from Bill McSweeney:<sup>13</sup>

*Most worrying is McSweeney's implicit argument that there is only one correct way to study security. We believe that there are many ways to understand security, and that each will have its merits and its drawbacks. Focusing on any one element will always make some things clearer at the cost of obscuring or distorting others. That is the nature of social theory, and there is no escape from it.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, McSweeney was also the first to apply the label 'Copenhagen School' (McSweeney 1996)

<sup>14</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, Slippery? Contradictory? Sociologically Untenable? The Copenhagen School Replies 1997, 249-250)

## 2.2 Securitization

At the heart of the Copenhagen School is securitization. Originally laid out by Wæver in 1998's *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* alongside Buzan's ideas regarding a sectoral analysis of security, securitization was a significant step in the wider field of Critical Security Studies. Later in 2003's *Regions and Powers*, securitization was applied to contemporary security issues across the globe, since then, it has been applied by scholars to a number of security related topics interested in exploring the driving forces behind geopolitical changes. Securitization is the constructivist face of the Copenhagen School which is paired with the more neorealist aspects of Regional Security Complex theory discussed in the following section.

As defined by Buzan and Wæver in the glossary of *Regions and Power*, securitization is:

*The discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat.*<sup>15</sup>

Here, 'political community' refers to a political structure within a securitizing actor with the capacity to shape security policy and/or narrative for a state (or non-state group such as a terror organization); this is the instrument by which the speech act is made which begins the process of securitization. These actors take the shape of "political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists, and political action groups".<sup>16</sup> This actor<sup>17</sup> then creates a narrative of threat to a 'referent object', which could be the nation itself, the international/regional order, the environment, or any number of other tangible or intangible objects, which must be defended for

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<sup>15</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 491)

<sup>16</sup> (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* 1998, 40)

<sup>17</sup> Which might be an individual speaking on behalf of the community, through an official government release such as a white paper, or a number of other manners of public speech.

the existential good of the collective securitizing actor.<sup>18</sup> Indeed the very act of adhering the label of ‘threat’ to an issue, genuine or political, transforms the issue into a securitized one.<sup>19</sup>

The ‘call for urgent and exceptional measures’ is a relative term which is dependent on the nature of the perceived threat to the referent object; these measures can be as innocuous as a strongly worded statement, or as provocative as military mobilization. As well, ‘dealing with the threat’ is not black and white; each instance of securitization by an actor regarding a referent object has acceptable conclusions and conditions for prolongment which are dependent on the threat itself and the context of the existential crisis for the political community. More succinctly, a political community will put forth action plans for exceptional measures which are consistent with the threat being faced in addition to (spoken or otherwise) acknowledging under what conditions this state of securitization will be prolonged or concluded. For example, a securitized economic disagreement between actors does not generally call for the eradication of an opposing political community, whereas a long-stewing, securitized rivalry between these same actors with historic patterns of enmity could prompt such zero-sum thinking. Generally, with the exception of extreme outlier states such as North Korea, whose political community cannot be said to always be participating in the same social reality as other states in the world-system, actors will react to threats in a logical parity with opposing political communities in securitized scenarios; this is not to insinuate that actors will not annihilate one another over securitized issues, history is testament to such, rather tensions reaching a point of ‘mutually assured destruction’ do not emerge from a vacuum.

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<sup>18</sup> (Emmers 2018, 169)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.71

## Securitization and Flashpoints

Securitization as described by the Copenhagen School presents a firm foundation to begin a study of flashpoints as it provides the necessary methodology to trace the casual chains between geopolitical actors which lead from contention to flashpoint inception. This work's definition of securitization, as it relates to flashpoints, largely mirrors that of Buzan and Wæver with the exception being that issues undergoing securitization leading to the formation of a flashpoint, are not necessarily, though certainly can be, existential. The exception stems from the fact that while indeed many flashpoints throughout the span of history have been existential in nature, such as wars of conquest or disputes over rightful governance, where the continuity of a political community is at stake, many of the contentions between actors such as in the realm of economics, limited territorial claims, or humanitarian intervention do not meet these criteria. Nonetheless, they share the same process of securitization as these truly existential examples wherein a political community's speech act regarding a threat to a referent object (the economy, international peace, etc.) is supported by calls for urgent action. However as will be seen in a subsequent chapter on 'high' and 'low' volatility flashpoints, this securitization is subject to nuances and to contextual variability dependent on factors unique to each flashpoint.

### **2.3 Regional Security Complex Theory – Flashpoints as Regional Issues**

The Copenhagen School of International Relations, and its idea of securitization, has put forth one of the most thought provoking post-Cold War methodologies for examining the geopolitical world: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). As described at-length in their 2003 book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Buzan and Wæver's RSCT is a comprehensive framework which can be used to describe historic and contemporary international relations through the lens of security, as well as provide a grounded base for foresight and



scenario building of near to mid-term geopolitical developments.<sup>20</sup> RSCT will be applied in this work in its analysis of geopolitical flashpoints in an assertion that flashpoints are inherently regional phenomenon and must be appreciated in light of regional dynamics.

True to its name, RSCT's primary analytical focus is the regional level of geopolitics. Juxtaposed to Cold War era thinking, which had a largely global scope of grand East-West security competition, RSCT posits that security begins at the regional level between local actors concerned over regional issues. In *Regions and Powers*, Buzan and Wæver describe the rationalization for the regional approach with a simple axiom: threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones. These threats generate security interdependences and patterns of amity and enmity, which in turn create regionally based clusters of security relationships-security complexes.<sup>21</sup> These complexes create a patchwork of global security relationships which span the entire world. The maps below from *Regions and Powers* (Figures 1 & 2) illustrate how regional security complexes (RSCs) evolved from the Cold War era to 2003 when the book was published. Though out of date, as is mentioned by Buzan and Wæver in independent works published in subsequent years, the 2003 map still largely reflects many of the overarching regional security relationships which continue on into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>20</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 65-70)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.4

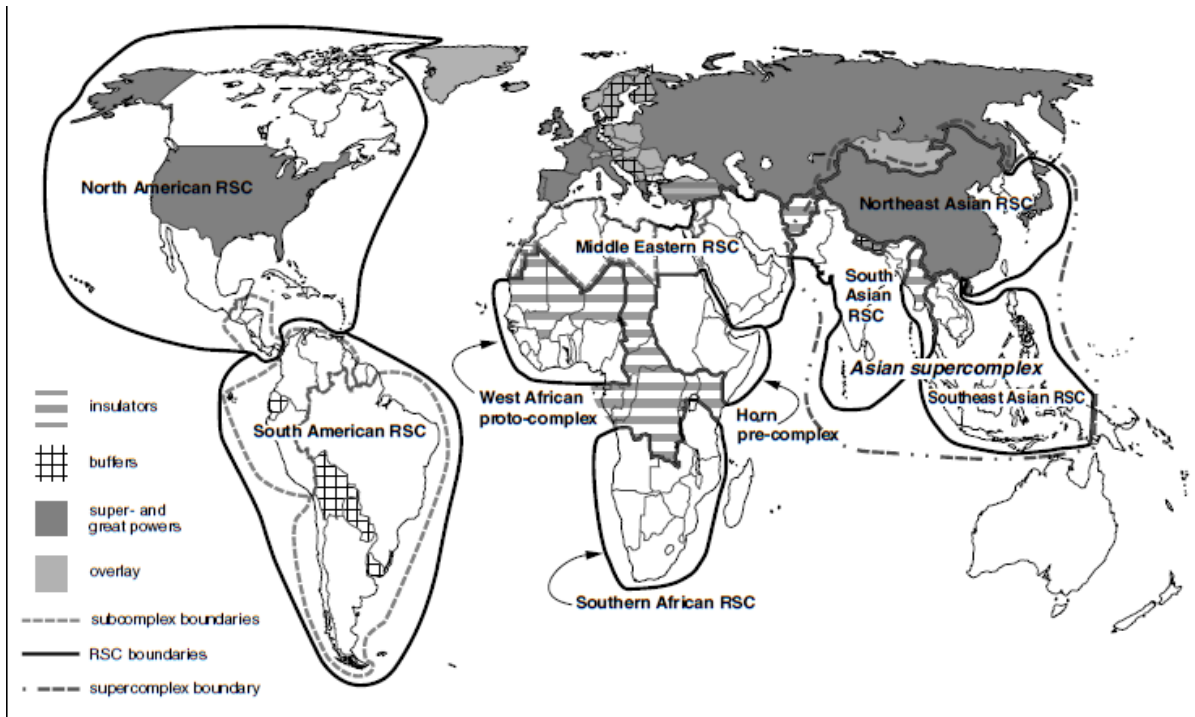


Figure 1 Patterns of regional security during the Cold War<sup>22</sup>

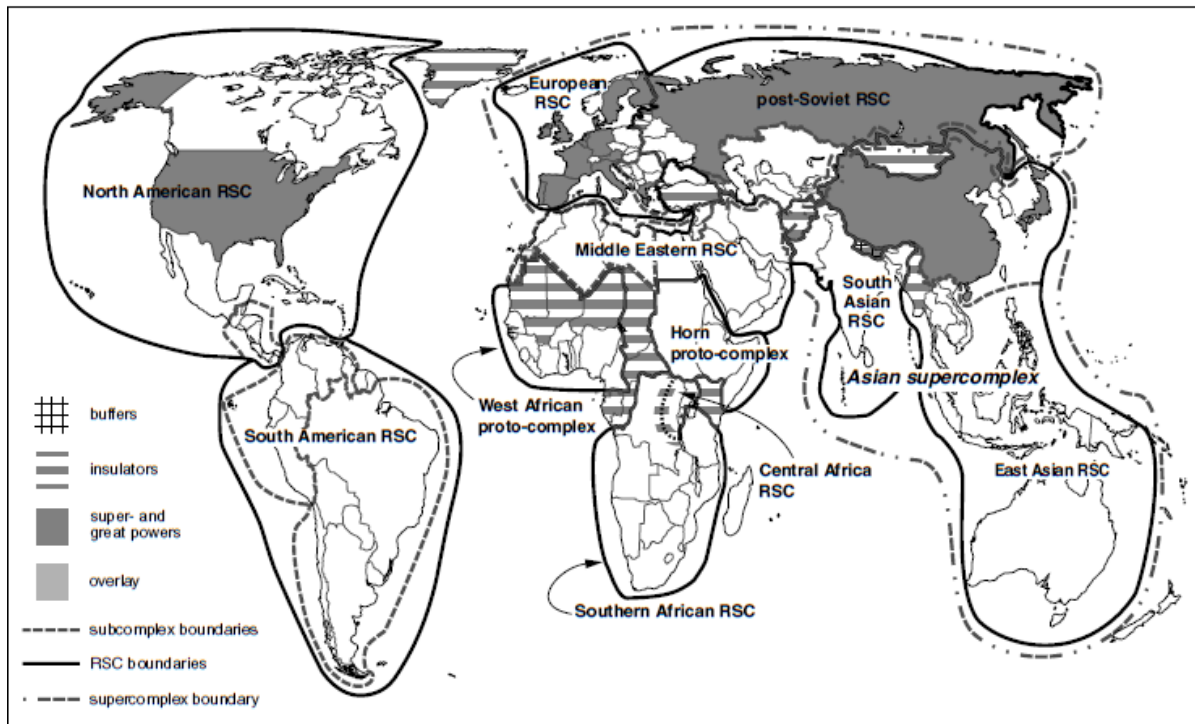


Figure 2 Patterns of regional security post-Cold War<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p. xxv

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. xxvi

In *Regions and Powers* Buzan and Wæver outline what they call the ‘essential structure’ of an RSC into four variables:

1. Boundaries which separate the RSC from its neighbors
2. Anarchic structure, meaning that the RSC must be composed of two or more autonomous units.
3. Polarity, which covers the distribution of power among units.
4. Social construction, which covers the patterns of amity and enmity among the units (actors)<sup>24</sup>

RSCs are a functionally defined type of region, as is commonly seen in the field of Area Studies, which may or may not coincide with more general or traditional understandings of a region.<sup>25</sup> As phenomena, RSCs are durable rather than permanent, meaning that they are not static in their membership and may grow or shrink in size along with the changing tides of geopolitics.<sup>26</sup> Seen in the maps above, this essential structure produces RSCs which are both grounded in reality, yet subjective in the sense that observers can appreciate their ‘organic’ nature as constructed ideas within social reality. Buzan and Wæver also posit three possible evolutions for an RSC:

1. Maintenance of the status quo: essentially a structural stability and a perpetuation of norms within the RSC
2. Internal transformation: meaning that changes to the status quo occur *within* the context of the RSCs existing boundaries. Examples include changes to the existing anarchic structure (ex. regional integration of the European Union), changes in polarity (ex. a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p 53

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 48

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 50

theoretical re-union of North and South Korea through a merging or conquest, or a significant disparity in growth rates among actors in an RSC), or changes to the prevailing patterns of amity and enmity (ex. from ideological shifts, war/rivalry weariness, changes in leadership, etc.)

3. External transformation: the boundary of the RSC with the wider world-system changes (expansion or contraction), thereby changing the membership of the RSC and its internal dynamics. This also includes RSCs splitting into separate RSCs or merging to form larger supercomplexes.<sup>27</sup>

As with securitization, RSCT also applies materialist and constructivist approaches in its analysis.<sup>28</sup> Materially it is concerned with the idea of 'bounded territoriality' and the dynamics of power distribution, it detracts from traditional materialist schools of thought however in its regional, rather than global focus. Its constructive characteristics are found in its application of securitization to these neo-realist perspectives. Here RSCT is open to a number of variables which could influence regional security and relations which would be disregarded in neo-realism, such as aforementioned patterns of amity and enmity, environmental factors, and globalization.<sup>29</sup> RSCT is able to synergize these two broadly different perspectives to create a more nuanced and fuller picture of regional security dynamics while not being corralled by entrenched theoretical dogma.

RSCT has proved to be a dynamic approach to security and is well represented in a number of subject areas within the fields of security studies and international relations. Indeed, its openness

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 53

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p 70-76

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.4,8

to differences in interpretation and development by outside scholars is a key reason why it has remained a productive methodology in literature. In closing their *Regions and Powers*, Buzan and Wæver noted:

*This book can be seen as an overview, one of whose main purposes is to identify a range of subjects around which more detailed studies could be organized. In that sense, this book opens up a research program rather than a competing one.*<sup>30</sup>

Whereas other schools of thought remain rigid in their methodologies, the Copenhagen School has purposefully avoided creating a culture of dogmatism in its literature, both from the likes of Buzan and Wæver as well as from scholars outside the immediate circle of the School who have contributed to its growth in popularity. This flexibility allows the School, securitization, and RSCT to meet evolving geopolitical realities and maintain their relevance as analytical tools.<sup>31</sup> As is described in greater detail in the following chapter, RSCT's methodological adaptability provides an opportunity to explore flashpoints through its regional analytical framework.

According to Buzan and Wæver, RSCT is “a theory of security in which geographical variables are central”, reinforcing the idea that a regional perspective, wherein groups of actors form units, provides pragmatic insights into actor-actor political dynamics which might be lost in a wider global perspective or overlooked in analysis which targets a single actor.<sup>32</sup> Not only concerned with the material aspects of geopolitics, RSCT also incorporates many constructivist ideas which enrich its analysis and perspective on regional dynamics. Its unitization provides a nuanced perspective of intraregional relationships, especially in relation to tensions between RSC actors, by tracking patterns of amity and enmity as well as providing a frame of reference which

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 488

<sup>31</sup> (Wæver 2017, 131-134)

<sup>32</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 70)

prevents an overinclusion of non-regional affairs in analysis. Tensions exist between all actors, though they are not all alike, and exist on a spectrum of volatility ranging from passive disagreements which can be easily compartmentalized<sup>33</sup> to those which present existential dilemma which provoke securitization.<sup>34</sup> When the process of securitization takes hold of a regional dispute and moves it further down the spectrum, it generates a geopolitical phenomenon at the center of the next chapter which holds the potential energy to trigger kinetic conflict: a flashpoint.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a survey on the quintessential characteristics of the Copenhagen School of international relations, its core idea of securitization, and the application of securitization in RSCT. Each offers its own insights into the geopolitical world and helps form a more comprehensive understanding of its history and developments. The Copenhagen School, in addition to proposing the securitization concept, has succeeded in the past three decades in broadening the understanding of security among both scholars and practitioners beyond the Cold War era frameworks of power politics. Its application of Constructivist ideas to security added a necessary human element into what had previously been a field dominated by black-and-white, reflexively materialistic perspectives. The School's flexibility in analysis, accepting both material and human input into its considerations, also provides for a unique perspective on developments which could be overlooked or dismissed from more dogmatically minded schools of thought.

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<sup>33</sup> Such as over non-existential issues over trade, cultural/civil policy, etc.

<sup>34</sup> Such as border disputes, resource sharing (ex. water rights), etc.

The Copenhagen School's concept of securitization gives more definition to the ideological contributions made by Buzan and Wæver in their earlier works. Its assertions of the importance of speech acts, especially those made by political communities, as a key factor in the perception of threats and genesis of conflict among geopolitical actors offered a fresh perspective in international relations when it was first theorized in the 1990s and continues to provide an alternative to more superficial Realist, reactionary interpretations of geopolitical developments. However, the concept does not completely dismiss traditional school of thought, drawing from neo-Realist ideas to synthesize with Constructivist outlooks, noting how material concerns prompt the existential speech acts and policies at the root of securitization.

Finally, RSCT applies securitization and wider insights from the Copenhagen School directly to international relations and contemporary geopolitics. RSCT posits that security begins at the regional level between local actors concerned over regional issues with the axiom: threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones. Through this framework historical patterns of amity and enmity, contemporary securitized issues by actors, and material realities are taken into account to demarcate regional security relationships around the globe. RSCT also highlights that not only are security issues largely regional but also that there is a significant security interdependence among regional actors, showing that not only do threats travel more easily over short distances, but they are likely to affect neighbors on their brief journey.

These themes and concepts form the methodological bedrock for this work and will be drawn on in subsequent chapters for their utility in offering thought-provoking insights into the nature and causes of tensions and conflict between states. The next chapter introduces and discusses the geopolitical phenomena of 'flashpoints' in the international system through the lens of the

Copenhagen School, employing the concept of securitization to elucidate this understudied subject in the field of international relations.

### 3 Flashpoints

When contentions between states reach a point of crisis, whether objective or subjective, a flashpoint is formed. These loci of tensions in the international system hold potential energy to escalate into conflict and are often centered on several interlinking securitized issues. While they can have reverberations around the world-system, they are inherently regional issues with roots between actors in geographic proximity to one another, generally within the same RSC. As flashpoints heat and move down a spectrum of volatility, the risk of kinetic action between actors increases exponentially to an eventual ignition event whereafter conflict begins. As the contemporary world-system is one which is hallmarked by escalating tensions, hegemonic rivalry, and brinkmanship, a fuller understanding of the nature of flashpoints is critical for avoiding warfare and preserving international stability. Yet, flashpoints remain an understudied subject with scant source material available which investigates them as social phenomenon.

This chapter begins with an overview of the limited academic source material on flashpoints, noting that while the term is frequently used in both media and research,<sup>35</sup> there is a critical deficiency in works which focus on the phenomena itself as most only offer a token reference to flashpoints in any theoretical sense.<sup>36</sup> Next, the phenomena of flashpoints is described, both with the aim to fill the aforementioned research gap, as well as establishing a foundation for a

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<sup>35</sup> For example: *Why the Solomon Islands has become a Key Global Geopolitical Flashpoint* (Schmidt 2022), *War in Israel: The new geopolitical flashpoint for ocean shipping* (Miller 2023), *A high-altitude tunnel is latest flashpoint in India-China border tensions* (McCarthy 2024)

<sup>36</sup> For example, George Friedman's *Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe* (2015) uses the word 44 times throughout his book, yet never describes flashpoints as a phenomenon or even provides a basic definition.



topology of flashpoints, a diagnostic, and the following chapter which discusses flashpoints of high and low volatility.

### **3.1 Flashpoints, an understudied subject**

Despite their ubiquitous usage in the vocabularies of international relations and security studies practitioners, flashpoints remain an understudied phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> The term is often employed in news headlines, journal articles, opinion pieces, and book titles, however these uses of ‘flashpoint’ are only stating a fact, concerned more with the contemporary affairs surrounding the specific flashpoint rather than the phenomenon itself. These certainly serve a purpose, as the empirical knowledge of the background and current issues unique to each flashpoint is important for both the academic understanding of areas of global contention as well as a diplomatic familiarity to avoid escalation. However in-depth studies of flashpoints as phenomena (related to conflict) are rare, to the point that a collection of such works could be comfortably carried in a backpack. Often as well, many works which do dedicate space to the nature of flashpoints offer only a brief explanation or posit a definition to be subsequently used in the work’s main focus of a singular flashpoint in the geopolitical world. However, there is a field within Social Science which also uses the term in a similar fashion, the study of crowd disorder.

Crowd disorder, also known as public disorder, crowd behavior, or crowd psychology, is the study of people in mass-gatherings such as at protests or sporting events and primarily focuses on these gatherings in the context of violence or conflict; or in plainer terms, is the study of how mass-gatherings turn into riots.<sup>38</sup> In 1989 Waddington *et al.* published *Flashpoints: Studies in Public Disorder* which describes a typographic model for understanding and analyzing crowd

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<sup>37</sup> (B. Taylor, *The South China Sea is Not a Flashpoint* 2014, 100)

<sup>38</sup> (Zeits, *et al.* 2012, 32-33)

disorder.<sup>39</sup> Dubbed the ‘flashpoints model of disorder’ by later authors, it is comprised of “a number of integrated levels of analysis that are used to explain why some potentially disorderly incidents (“flashpoints”) fail to ignite, while other, ostensibly similar, incidents can trigger an explosive social reaction”.<sup>40</sup> Though at first glance crowd disorder and international relations as fields of study would appear to have little in common, they in-fact have several parallels which can be synthesized. For instance, both deal with collective entities/actors: crowds, as collections of individuals gathered for protests or social events (ex. sporting events), and states, as collections of citizens and residents. As well, studies on flashpoints in crowd disorder have shown, as will be demonstrated in this work concerning geopolitical flashpoints, that rather than a single factor leading to an instance of violence (conflict), an aggregate of unique circumstances with traceable casual chains leads to ignition events which spark the flashpoint:

*Frequently the actual flashpoint incident is only the latest one in a series of similar incidents, but to the extent that it crystallizes current feelings of discontent, it comes to be regarded as the ‘final straw’.*<sup>41</sup>

While each flashpoint is unique, their underlying mechanics are discernible which permits a topology to be created to study them as social phenomenon.<sup>42</sup>

### **3.2 A review of available literature on geopolitical flashpoints**

As was mentioned above, there is limited academic work available which centers on geopolitical flashpoints as a phenomenon. From these fragmentary resources a foundation can be distilled from which this work’s own study of flashpoints can begin.

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<sup>39</sup> (Waddington, Jones and Critcher 1989)

<sup>40</sup> (King and Waddington 2005, 255)

<sup>41</sup> (Waddington, Jones and Critcher 1989, 2) see also (Bliss, et al. 2004)

<sup>42</sup> (D. P. Waddington 2010, 347)

Hoyt (2003) offers one of the longest descriptions of nature of flashpoints in his work analyzing the flashpoint between India and Pakistan in Kashmir.<sup>43</sup> For Hoyt, flashpoints are recurring or relatively constant foci of conflict existing between at least one dissatisfied state.<sup>44</sup> Hoyt's definition of flashpoints does not center only on security tensions between states, but rather posits that flashpoints can form from a number of different categories of geopolitical contentions:<sup>45</sup>

Contested territory- such as the historical struggles over the control of Alsace and Lorraine

Ideological differences- those which can form from opposing forms of government such as democratic vs. authoritarian.

Results of partition from negotiation or conflict- such as Northern Ireland, Israel and the Palestinian territories, and the divided Koreas

Hoyt continues by identifying 'certain common elements' of significant flashpoints<sup>46</sup> which he generalizes as politics, proximity, and paranoia.<sup>47</sup> Here Hoyt places his arguments within a solidly material stream of thinking, centering descriptions largely through the lens of contested territories.

Politics- Similar to a referent object in securitization, Hoyt states a driving element of flashpoints is conflict over disputed regions which have real (material) or symbolic (constructed) value to both sides. Both sides have placed sufficient value on the sovereignty of this particular region to justify (to themselves) a necessity of maintaining a military option to promote their interests;

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<sup>43</sup> (Hoyt 2003)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p.118

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.118

<sup>46</sup> Here, Hoyt does not define what separates 'significant' flashpoints from minor.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 119-123

though Hoyt does not make the assertion himself, this parallels many of the aspects of the Copenhagen School's securitization. Hoyt further details the political element of flashpoints to divide them into three types of values which can be placed by actors on the referent object in question:

*Fear*- security motivated concerns based on a threat to the sovereignty, stability, or core values of a state. This also includes 'fear' of irreparable damage to a state's long-term security position and strategic goals.

*Honor*- Hoyt roots this value in ideas of Westphalian sovereignty, namely that the concession of territory to an adversary is an extraordinary event which normally only comes as a result of coercion or compliance; this value can also be a simile to revanchism. Additionally, Hoyt also contends that supporting international commitments (to a treaty ally, ideological ally, etc.) or breaking those commitments which also take the shape of international liberal norms (such as with the case of Iraq in the First Gulf War) can serve as catalyst of a flashpoint.

*Interest*- Hoyt points to economic interests as being the most important factor in this value, such as control over a critical resource (ex. oil fields, rare earth deposits, etc.), but also those of strategic interest such as buffer zones between hostile states, or those of domestic political interest (ex. the US' domino theory during the Cold War)

Proximity- Similar to the axiom of RSCT, threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones, discussed in the previous chapter, Hoyt notes "geographic proximity increases the probability that a location will become a recurring scene of dispute".<sup>48</sup> He notes as well that the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid p.121

same partition of a territory, mentioned above, can contribute to this elemental proximity, as often contested territory forms along the border regions of states which have undergone partition.

Paranoia- This element can be summated as 'international concern' which Hoyt provides three main sources of such 'concern' which could define a flashpoint.

*Concern over escalation*- that a limited conflict could broaden to a wider conflict which would involve not only increased commitment to conflict from the actors involved, but also could possibly draw in other actors.

*Concern over alliance/organizational collapse*- that a conflict between otherwise allies could fracture a larger alliance group divided on the outcome, here Hoyt uses the example of a NATO collapse over a hypothetical Greco-Turkish conflict over Cyprus.

*Concern over 'outside power' entanglement*- the potential for an outside power, Hoyt specifically points to great powers and superpowers, to become involved in a local conflict which could adversely affect international stability or security.

Though his section on flashpoints amounts to only seven pages, Hoyt's contributions to the understanding of flashpoints as a phenomenon offer interesting starting points to a more detailed study. His categorization and 'common elements' of flashpoints reflect many of the positions which the Copenhagen School takes on matters of security, namely that they have both significant materiel (ex. territorial concerns) as well as constructed (ex. political perception) factors of consequence which cannot be fully appreciated unless they are viewed as equal.

Hoyt's work is cited in Brendan Taylor's *Four Flashpoints: How Asia Goes to War* which also offers a brief (one and a half page) discussion of flashpoints as a phenomenon.<sup>49</sup> Drawing from a scientific definition, the lowest temperature at which vapors from a liquid will ignite, Taylor defines flashpoints in international affairs as "geographic areas with the potential to erupt suddenly into violent conflict."<sup>50</sup> His discussion of flashpoints centers on an analysis of the structural factors which can lead to conflict, sometimes decades in the making before the onset of conflict. He cites an example proposed by Harvard professor Joseph Nye who likened conflict to building a fire: the structural causes are the logs, which themselves are necessary for a fire, but unable to ignite without kindling and a match, which in turn needs striking- a flashpoint. He further references Nye's example by giving the inverse of flashpoint ignition "logs may sit for a long time and never be lit. Indeed, if it rains before somebody comes along with a match, they may never catch fire."<sup>51</sup> Taylor's book, though short on theory regarding flashpoints, gives extensive empirical insight into four major contemporary flashpoints in Asia. Throughout the more than two hundred pages of his work, he highlights the complex nature of these flashpoints and how each holds the potential to have serious repercussions in the event of an ignition.

The descriptions of the circumstances surrounding these Asian flashpoints points towards a larger discourse on the constructed aspects of the phenomenon which are spurred on by geopolitical events and viewed by states through a Realist lens, but cannot be separated from their human nature. In discussing Taiwan for example, Taylor states:

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<sup>49</sup> (B. Taylor, *Four Flashpoints: How Asia Goes to War* 2018)

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid* p. 27

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid* p.27-28

*Logic suggests that China, Taiwan, or the United States would prefer not to wage a catastrophic war. The costs are too great. But history tells us that states don't always go to war for rational reasons. Throughout history, emotional factors, such as fear and honour, have provided sparks for conflict. So, the next decade is set to be a dangerous one.*<sup>52</sup>

Another important contributor to the study of the phenomenon of flashpoints is Ewan W. Anderson whose book *Global Geopolitical Flashpoints: An Atlas of Conflict* (2000) tackled the daunting task of mapping the world's flashpoints, major or minor.<sup>53</sup> Though his overt description of flashpoints as a phenomenon lasts only through the book's short introduction, his empirical discussion of 123 unique flashpoints provides important insights into his understanding of flashpoints and remains unmatched in the field for its scope. For each flashpoint Anderson provides a summary of the flashpoint's contemporary situation (relative to its 2000 publication), its historical background, primary driving factors, maps highlighting areas and features of importance, as well as a short bibliography for further reading. Though dated by the time of this work's writing, many of these flashpoints continue to exist into the present which perpetuates the book's relevance and utility for the study of flashpoints.

Anderson defines flashpoints as "current, dormant, or potential areas of geopolitical instability," a broader definition than that used by Hoyt which, as is evident by the number of flashpoints covered in his atlas, adheres the label to many disputes which to other researchers might be more cautious in calling a flashpoint. As well he posits that flashpoints "are not necessarily restricted by area," meaning that there is not necessarily a limit to how small, or how large a flashpoint can

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid p. 140

<sup>53</sup> (E. W. Anderson 2000)

be (in regard to area), nor are they simply single geographic points. Anderson gives three types of areas which could be considered flashpoints:<sup>54</sup>

Specific points- extremely specific geographic features which are the center of points of contention, such as the Liancourt Rocks (between South Korea (natively Dokdo) and Japan (natively Takeshima)), or the Golan Heights (between Israel and Syria)

Linear features- largely centering on disputed borders such as the 'Line of Actual Control' (Sino-Indian boundary), or the various overlapping claims of the South China Sea

States or sections of states- Anderson points to these being the most numerous flashpoints in his atlas and are larger and less well defined than 'specific points', instead being areas of states which have disputed claims to sovereignty (or independence). Anderson gives the examples of Kurdistan and Transylvania, though more contemporary examples would be Essequibo (recognized as being territory of Guyana though claimed by Venezuela) or the numerous breakaway republics supported/created by Russia during the first two decades of the 2000s (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, etc.)

In his definition, Anderson also lists five geopolitical factors of instability which could result in flashpoints: strategic/military, political, economic, social, and environmental. He adds that these often synergize with one another as well as in many cases concern boundaries, similar to Hoyt. He closes his introduction in highlighting these factors for contributing to the complexity of identifying and describing flashpoints:<sup>55</sup>

*All of the case studies are defined as geopolitical flashpoints in that they represent the interplay of geography and politics. As is clear from the factors giving rise to flashpoints, the*

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.xvii

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.xvii-xviii



*geographical component may derive from any aspect of the subject: physical, political, economic, social or military. A key variable is location. Straits and isolated islands with a potential for Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims are good examples. Many flashpoints, such as Rwanda, Burundi, Guyana, Transylvania, and Northern Ireland, result from ethnic, religious, or other societal cleavages. Some, such as Mururoa Atoll, Tacna, and the Hatay, include a component of historical geography. Economic concerns can influence in some way most territorial claims, but in particular, the relationship between isolated island groups and the potential for petroleum exploration is significant.*

Given that his explicit description of flashpoints is limited to his short introduction, deeper insights into Anderson's understanding of flashpoints must be sleuthed from the text of his atlas.

From this, important characteristics of flashpoints identified by him can be uncovered.

Anderson gives important emphasis to the age of flashpoints and their relative level of activity, either as 'active,' 'dormant', or 'potential' relating to the tension surrounding the issue and its likelihood to cause geopolitical instability among the actors involved. Spitzbergen (more commonly known as Svalbard) for example, Anderson considers to be a dormant issue due to the end of the Cold War dissipating much of the impetus for Russia to press its claims to linear features regarding the continental shelf, though he suggests that the situation could change in the future due to the strategic importance of the nearby Kola Peninsula for Moscow.<sup>56</sup> He also in particular entries removes the label of flashpoint all together, rather citing particular areas of tensions as 'irritant' (Gibraltar, Abu Musa & Tunbs Islands)<sup>57</sup> or 'contentious' (Rockall & St. Kilda)<sup>58</sup>, implying that such areas would need periods of tension building before flashpoint inception, though the status-quo negatively impacts relations.

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<sup>56</sup> (E. W. Anderson 2000, 308-309)

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.123, 3

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.275

As well, Anderson makes distinctions between the potential level of impact a flashpoint can have on the world-system. The Western Sahara (territory) for example, is stated to “likely excite little more than local interest”, though will remain a flashpoint.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the Caprivi Strip and the Basque Country are suggested to be local, rather than global issues.<sup>60</sup> He ascribes the label ‘key flashpoint’ to those which would likely garner significant international attention or have noteworthy reverberations throughout the world-system (usually due to economics). Some of these key flashpoints have persisted into the present since Anderson published the Atlas in 2000, such as the Shatt al-Arab, the Ogaden, the Strait of Hormuz, and Nagorno-Karabakh, the latter of which ignited on several occasions in the early 2020s.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, some flashpoints are noted for their ‘global’ impact and their potential to spread into wider, possibly extra-regional conflicts, such as South Lebanon, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Kurdistan<sup>62</sup>.

Though there have been significant changes in the geopolitical world since the Atlas was published, it remains an excellent collection of often still relevant information on contemporary flashpoints, especially regarding their background. Anderson’s work is unique in its attempt, and relative success to assemble a catalogue of flashpoints with both a wide scope and comparative detail for scholarly analysis.

Despite the scant literature which exists focusing on flashpoints as a subject of research, Hoyt, Taylor, and Anderson have contributed to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Each offers their own frame of reference regarding flashpoints. Hoyt’s detailing of the characteristics of flashpoint genesis, especially the political drivers of their inception, gives insight into the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p.366

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 71, 35

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p, 293, 253, 143, 238

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 306, 10, 167, 186

human factors which form the social root of flashpoints. Anderson meanwhile provides a broad definition of flashpoints with his Atlas' Archimedean point of view on 123 unique foci of tensions in the world-system and a number of necessary descriptive terms to aid in the empirical understanding of flashpoints.

The following section synthesizes these author's insights, as well as those from the study of crowd disorder and the Copenhagen School discussed in the previous chapter to contribute its own perspectives on this critically understudied subject and to form an understanding of flashpoints which will be applied during subsequent chapters of this work.

### **3.3 Classifying Geopolitical Flashpoints**

As was mentioned in the beginning of the previous chapter, conflict is not spontaneous. A flashpoint is the focal point of geopolitical tensions which have been securitized by actors and hold potential energy to trigger kinetic conflict. All flashpoints are unique, as the circumstances which brought about their inception are relative to the historical relations and level of securitization between the actors involved; however, it is possible to form important generalizations and identify certain characteristics regarding flashpoints which can be attributed to them as phenomena, permitting a useful degree of classification which will be employed in the following chapters.

Beginning with the inception of flashpoints, there are several identifiable types of disputes between actors from which the phenomena could originate. Often flashpoints find their genesis in several, compounding disputes with a similar plurality of drivers for each:

Territorial – Flashpoints with territorial dispute roots begin due to conflicting claims by actors over the sovereignty of territory; namely that they do have sovereignty (or should), and the other does not. These claims are justified by:

*Historical roots* – Claims that the territory in question forms an integral part of the greater national whole. Claimants assert that either this territory was rightfully ceded/negotiated to a new sovereign (though not delivered in part or in whole)<sup>63</sup> or was unjustly ceded/negotiated through coercion. Modern examples include Gibraltar, Kosovo, and Essequibo.

*Contemporary security concerns*- These claims assert that control over particular territory, such as with Israel and the Golan Heights, is necessary for national security and discourages aggressive maneuvers from opposing actors. Conflicts centering on the seizing/holding/regaining of these strategic areas may begin with limited goals but can expand as grievances grow during the conflict.

*Imperial ambitions*- Though these have in modern times often been veiled by a more marketable *casus belli* due to governance by force falling out of fashion, the drive to ‘paint the map our color’ has been a constant throughout human history from Sargon’s Akkadian Empire to Japan’s ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’.

Political- These flashpoints center on constructed concerns of political communities:

*Ideology*- Preventing the spread of alternative forms of governance, usually running concurrently with promoting the actor’s own preferred form (communism/fascism/authoritarianism vs. capitalist/liberal order/democracy etc.). Historical examples of holy wars (Christian crusades,

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<sup>63</sup> For example: After a hypothetical conflict between the United States and Canada, the United States negotiated the concession of British Columbia, however, Canada maintained a hold on Vancouver Island and refused to withdraw its military assets fortifying the island.

Islamic jihad, etc.) also fall under this category as do their modern instances of religious terrorism/conflict such as the Islamic State's conquests from the mid-to-late 2010s or the various religious insurgencies of the Sahel.

*International orders of power-* Maintaining or subverting contemporary 'pecking orders' of international power, this takes the form of hegemonic and great power competition at its highest levels.<sup>64</sup> In regional dynamics this can involve a state not being welcomed in to, or rejecting regional diplomatic power dynamics (such as removal/suspension or withdrawal from regional multilateral forums). As well, actors might also look to restore likeminded or allied political communities which have been ousted by revolution or conflict, as was seen after a series of coups in West Africa in the early 2020s which prompted the ECOWAS bloc to threaten collective action to restore democratic leadership in several suspended member states.<sup>65</sup>

*Rightful governance-* The assertion of one political community of the right to govern an opposing sovereign actor, in part or in whole, while simultaneously asserting that this actor's present political community is a pretender or usurper to their legitimacy. This differs from the 'historical roots' mentioned above in its focus on achieving a political supremacy over a people(s) and installing a new political community which will in turn govern over the territory (possibly leading to incorporation with the aggressor or the installation of a puppet regime). Historically wars of succession were rooted in such flashpoints, in the modern era this serves as a *casus belli* for conflicts of national(ist) unity.

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<sup>64</sup> In this way, Thucydides' Trap can prompt flashpoints between rising and falling powers. (Mohammed 2018) see also: (Kugler and Organski 2011) (Lai 2011)

<sup>65</sup> Though this conflict ultimately never began, the flashpoint remained incredibly tense for several months as both sides very publicly saber rattled. (Chason 2023)

Socio-economic- These flashpoints have roots in issues which directly affect a population as opposed to constructed ideas which largely concern only political communities, or center on aspects of what could broadly be labeled as morality.

*Humanitarian*- Here states cite a moral imperative which pushes them towards conflict. Often more limited in scope than other flashpoints, those driven by humanitarian concerns aim to stop crimes against humanity (ex. genocide) or violent persecution.

*Economic stability/security*- Rises from threats to the national economy and the economic stability of the population (either whole or in part). As well, control over a critical resource (ex. hydrocarbons) or trade choke-point (ex. Malacca or Danish straits) can serve to create tensions or a drive for conflict.<sup>66</sup> The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile River formed a flashpoint between Ethiopia and downstream states, most vocally Egypt, whose agriculture sector and electric power generation from the Aswan dam rely on the river and claim that the dam's restriction on the natural flow of the Nile threatens both.

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<sup>66</sup> The Copenhagen Convention of 1857 which abolished the Sound Dues of the Danish Straits is an example of a flashpoint forming due to trade choke-points; though a low volatility flashpoint, had the Danish government refused, it can be speculated that more forceful coercion on the part of Russia and the United Kingdom could have appeared.

*Table 1 Classifications of Geopolitical Flashpoints*

Type of dispute	Drivers	Key issues
Territorial	historical roots, contemporary security concerns, imperial ambitions	conflicting claims by actors over the sovereignty of territory, perceived security threats
Political	ideology, international orders of power, rightful governance	Constructed ideas of a political community, legitimacy
Socio-economic	Humanitarian, economic stability/security	Human rights, predictable economic environment, control over resources/economic choke-points

Flashpoints are rarely single-issue phenomena. Rather than being focused on a monolithic securitized issue, flashpoints are often driven by multiple, interlinking issues across the fields listed above. While one securitized issue might be championed as the impetus of the flashpoint, these additional underlying tensions can also trigger ratcheting, the raising of tensions along the spectrum of volatility, or even act as catalysts for flashpoint ignition. During the process of securitization political communities will interrelate separate issues to create a synthesis of enmity which strengthens their existential claims in regard to the referent object. As the complexity of securitized issues reinforces tensions between actors, the resistance to de-escalation or trust building increases and opens opportunities for other issues to become securitized; for this reason, high volatility flashpoints often involve more points of contention than those of low volatility which might center on only a single driver from the table above. The flashpoint which led to the Crimean War (1853-56) for example was constituted of several interlinking securitized issues, conglomerated in part as the “Eastern question”, which independently would have been unlikely to contain the potential energy necessary for an ignition to occur. However, as a gestalt, these

issues were able to reinforce one another in order to produce a flashpoint with sufficient volatility which led to sustained kinetic conflict once hostilities began. The multifaceted nature of flashpoints is central to their durability and is the second key generalization of this phenomenon.

Flashpoints are durable rather than permanent fixtures in the world-system, meaning that a flashpoint might exist between actors for months, years, decades, or even centuries before a conflict or dissolution.<sup>67</sup> In this way flashpoints are similar to a ‘wicked problem’; as a flashpoint grows in its complexity so does the effort needed to alleviate tensions and de-escalate.<sup>68</sup> This complexity itself can serve to ratchet tensions as negotiations over disputes become gridlocked in minutia, ‘red lines’, and ‘non-starters’. Securitization is the source of this durability, stemming from the existential narratives used by political communities which begin the securitization process. The risk of losing face and prestige, which often equates to a threat of losing political power, prompts one political generation to pass on securitized issues to the next generation, prolonging flashpoints. Similar to sustained conflict between actors which can create an internal culture of animosity towards the ‘other’, flashpoints which have remained between actors for extended periods can also foster enmity which perpetuates the political will necessary to securitize issues. As well, a flashpoint can go through several reincarnations, even after sustained conflict; should the underlying securitized issues remain unresolved after the cessation

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<sup>67</sup> For example: a flashpoint existed between the Kingdom of France and England (later Great Britain) for centuries centering on a number of securitized issues such as: English territory on the European mainland (beginning with William the Conqueror in 1066 until the surrender of Calais in 1558), English claims to the French throne (beginning with Edward III in 1340 until the treaty of Amiens in 1802), and colonial territories (roughly 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). More recently, the flashpoint on the Korean peninsula has existed since the end of hostilities with the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953.

<sup>68</sup> A definition given by (Ritchey 2013) for wicked problems states they are “sets of complex, interacting issues evolving in a dynamic social context. Often, new forms of wicked problems emerge as a result of trying to understand and treat one of them”



of hostilities or a culture of revanchism appear, the flashpoint will once again form. For example, a flashpoint has existed between the political communities of Armenia and Azerbaijan for several decades over securitized issues surrounding the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, reappearing twice after sustained kinetic action (1991-1994, 2022) before a final Armenian nationalist defeat in 2023 and the formal dissolution of the ruling government in the enclave. There remains the possibility of the flashpoint reappearing in the future, indeed if it has dissolved along with the enclave's government, however given Armenia's decisive military defeat in the 2023 conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh's de-population of ethnic Armenians, and a lack of outside actors interested in providing Armenia with the necessary support to assert its claims, it appears unlikely that this particular issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan can sustain adequate securitization to form another flashpoint; though another growing flashpoint exists between the two regarding the future of the Azeri exclave of Nakhichevan.<sup>69</sup>

A third generalization which can be made in regard to flashpoints is that they are volatile phenomena, holding the potential energy to ignite and bring about kinetic conflict between actors. This volatility exists on an aforementioned spectrum, anchored on one end by a low-burning securitization which would require significant ratcheting before reaching ignition, and imminent flashpoint ignition on the other where securitization has reached its most existential point. As a flashpoint moves down the spectrum and becomes more volatile, the pathways towards de-escalation become both fewer as well as less appealing for the actors involved. During this move down, flashpoints will often acquire new disputes and drivers as points of contention; these could otherwise be resolved or 'swept under the rug' between actors, however they too become securitized as the flashpoint strains bilateral, and in the case of region-wide

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<sup>69</sup> (Krivosheev 2023)

flashpoints, multilateral relations. With tensions ratcheting and securitization taking a deeper hold, actors invest increasing amounts of ‘face’ and prestige into the outcome, which the political community that began the securitization has gambled will pay dividends after successful kinetic action or a favorable settlement to the underlying geopolitical concerns. This gamble however can quickly foster a decision-making culture supported by a sunk-cost fallacy, promoting an irrational persistence in zero-sum thinking which forestalls opportunities for equitable settlement through negotiation or trust-building through constructive engagement.

As there is no ‘great dashboard’ of international relations with meters and dials which are able to signal that volatility surrounding a flashpoint is reaching critical levels, actors can inadvertently stumble into conflict. Bifurcation points, events where causal chains lead to exclusive divergences in future social reality, ignition events for the purpose of this study, are only identifiable in hindsight.<sup>70</sup> Once a flashpoint ratchets to sufficient volatility even minor provocations, which previously would have only served as ratcheting events, can become catalysts for flashpoint ignition. There is no methodology for determining when a bifurcation point has been reached, again as these can only be appreciated in hindsight, however, it is possible to appraise the flashpoint holistically to give an approximate gauge of tensions between actors which can indicate the likelihood that volatility has reached sufficient levels for ignition. In this way flashpoints can be appreciated as stochastic phenomena, where future developments can be postulated with a degree of certainty however cannot be predicted precisely.<sup>71</sup> While political communities might have a finesse to avoid an unwanted conflict, or lack the willpower or materiel means to make the final ratchet into conflict, the longer a flashpoint exists between

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<sup>70</sup> (Ochrana 2015, 41)

<sup>71</sup> (Ochrana 2015, 42-43)

actors without resolution or de-escalation the more likely it is to become a facet of internal political culture which itself prevents resolution and de-escalation.<sup>72</sup> This particular generalization will be expounded in the following chapter.

A fourth generalization is that flashpoints are inherently regional phenomena. Recounting the RSCT axiom that threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones, flashpoints find their roots in contentions between neighbors or those within their RSC, with only great powers (who possess significant power projection capabilities) being able to sustain the necessary securitization to create a flashpoint well outside of their RSC.<sup>73</sup> Even should states have significant disputes with one another, geographic realities quench many of drivers which would promote flashpoint creation, especially in the realm of security as the possibility of kinetic conflict is necessary for a flashpoint to form.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, the linkages between states which would prompt securitizations shrink in correlation to geographic distances, diminishing the prospect of flashpoint inception; there are few, if any plausible scenarios for a flashpoint to form between Peru and Pakistan. In regard to great power penetration into distant RSCs' flashpoints, these too are often rooted in regional issues as opposed to being directly sparked by the great

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<sup>72</sup> *Carthago delenda est*

<sup>73</sup> Examples from the last half century include the United States' wars in Iraq (2003-11) and Afghanistan (2001-2021). Even among great powers, sustaining warfare outside of an RSC is a draining endeavor requiring a level of logistical capacity, domain awareness, and experience with joint operations that can only be achieved by the foremost of military powers; though exceptions do exist in limited numbers, Cuba's Operation Carlota in the mid-1970s to support the MPLA in Angola's civil war.

<sup>74</sup> To posit a hypothetical example: A new, rabidly populist government is formed in Kazakhstan after a period of political instability. This new government, citing the 'robbery' of national resources has nationalized all extraction industries save those owned by its neighbors. Italy, the country's largest export partner in 2022, in turn has its assets seized including sizable investments in the oil and gas sector (Staubaldina 2024). Though doubtlessly this has diminished relations between the two, likely including public denunciations and sanctions/tit-for-tat seizures, a flashpoint is unable to form because there is no possibility of kinetic action between the two, as not only are Italian military assets unable to project power independently at that distance, the airspace that it would need to go through for such an action is controlled by actors who are likely unwilling to permit such passage.

power. To cite a historical example: the United States' war in Vietnam centered on a regional issue, the sovereignty and continuity of South Vietnam as a political entity in relation to the North; the flashpoint was not of Washington's making, rather was rooted in contentions between Hanoi and Saigon around their mutual dispute over rightful governance of a united Vietnam. The United States penetrated into the RSC, and thus the conflict, in order to support its grand strategy in Southeast Asia, however, the flashpoint's origins had formed between the North and South independently of the United States.

A final key generalization on flashpoints is their constructed nature as social phenomena which are influenced by the Realist interpretations of geopolitical circumstances by political communities. In line with the Copenhagen School, flashpoints can be viewed dualistically through both a Constructivist and Realist lens to offer analytical insights on securitized tensions between actors. The Constructivist aspects of flashpoints relate to the necessity of human agency in their creation, duration, and ultimate dissolution or ignition. To be distilled into an axiom: the tensions and securitization necessary for flashpoints to exist require human action. Specifically, they require a conscious decision on the part of at least one of the political communities to pursue confrontational policies in an effort to achieve specific political goals, which themselves are inherently constructed within the context of a political culture. In their Realist dimensions, flashpoints are phenomena brought about by the reflexive reactions of states to the geopolitical actions of others in an anarchical social reality; these reactions must take into account the self-help and zero-sum nature of contemporary international relations and pursue policies which offer the best possible combination of strategic advantage and minimal materiel loss. The dual constructive-realist aspect of flashpoints is at the root of their stochastic nature. Individual approaches by each analytical school provides their own interpretation of developments with

particular degrees of assuredness, however when combined with the juxtaposed moiety, the true pattern of social reality can be appreciated for its structures and trends, where futures can be postulated within the bounds of social reality but nevertheless cannot interpreted until after revelation.<sup>75</sup>

An interesting example of this dualistic nature is found in the case of the Camp David Accords and the dissolution of a decade's old flashpoint in the Middle East. These political agreements signed by Israel and Egypt in 1978 provided a framework for the Egypt-Israel peace treaty of 1979 which effectively dissolved a flashpoint which had existed between the two since the creation of Israel in 1948 and had ignited on multiple occasions since then- most recently just five years prior. From a Realist perspective, the accords answered existential needs which were becoming more urgent for both actors, namely: Egypt's desire to recover territories lost during the Yom Kippur and Six-Day wars, and to begin a focus on internal restructuring (especially economically) rather on external power projection and leadership in the Arab World; and Israel's desire to mitigate a decades long security threat from the most powerful military in the region, in addition to receiving an acknowledgement from an Arab state for Israel's right to exist as a state. Constructively, the actors involved in the flashpoint were able to meet for the accords to make a conscious decision to remove the flashpoint between them without an imminent pressure of military defeat by either party, putting aside maximalist goals stemming from both idealistic and strategically minded factions within their respective political communities. Though the effects were not immediate, nor universally felt, this conscious lowering of tensions between actors who had so recently and passionately been engaged in conflict was able to construct a new path forward for Israel and its neighbors in the coming years, with Jordan establishing diplomatic

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<sup>75</sup> (Ochrana 2015, 32-33)

relations with Israel in 1994, and a gradual warming of ties with other Arab states in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as shown by the growing number of Arab League states signing or showing interest in becoming signatories to the Abraham Accords.<sup>76</sup>

### **3.4 Flashpoint Diagnostic**

This dissertation asserts that flashpoints are constructed phenomenon and therefore maintain an inherent subjectivity in analysis. While individual flashpoints are unique, they share broader thematic characteristics with other flashpoints within social reality; it is therefore possible to create a ‘diagnostic’ to discern the regular disputes and disagreements which constitute international relations with the potentially volatile flashpoints. The list of indicators below is not exhaustive, though it does cover an array of criterion to identify a flashpoint and gives supporting context to each indicator in order to demonstrate how it can be viewed in light of evaluating flashpoints. As well, these indicators themselves are subjective and must be appreciated in light of the contemporary issues which surround the relations between states.<sup>77</sup>

Indicators were chosen with two key criteria in mind: scope and applicability. For the diagnostic to be effective it is essential that it be able to cover the multitude of different types of signals which can denote the existence of a flashpoint while maintaining a compendious utility. The scope therefore centers on concise, identifiable events taken by actors<sup>78</sup> as opposed to the long-

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<sup>76</sup> The effect of the Israel-Gaza War which began in 2023 on the developments surrounding the Abraham accords remains to be seen, though certainly it has dampened much of the good will which had formed between Israel and Arab states; indeed the war has prompted securitization around the region not only due to the war in Gaza itself, but also due to Israel’s continuing strikes on military and politico-military targets within its neighbors’ borders.

<sup>77</sup> For example: raising protectionist barriers to trade can indeed indicate a flashpoint exists, however if these barriers were raised after a new government has been elected to office on a platform of promoting domestic production/consumption and limiting imports, assuming that no other tensions exist between states, this would not be indicative of a flashpoint.

<sup>78</sup> For example: the mobilization of military forces or implementing trade embargoes

term trends and drivers of flashpoints which are covered instead by the classifications discussed in section 3.4. Framing the indicators in this way also aligns them with recent research which models ratcheting events between states, and points towards smaller ‘salami slice’<sup>79</sup> incidents as having significant impacts on overall prospect of flashpoint ignition.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, the list of indicators below is designed to be applicable to a wide spectrum of contemporary and near-future flashpoints, referencing the harbingers of major and minor conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century through historical surveys as well as synthesizing literature on conflict emergence, brinkmanship, and previously mentioned literature on flashpoints.<sup>81</sup> Focusing on this time period limits the diagnostic’s utility in historical analysis as not all indicators, such as employing grey zone tactics or deploying A2/AD assets, were functionally present before this time period (or indeed even for large portions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century); however as the diagnostic’s primary intention is to be employed as a tool for identify existing and emerging flashpoints and gauge their volatility as a means of conflict avoidance and contemporary analysis, its inefficacy in backward-facing investigations does not detract from its expected utility.

These indicators are under most circumstances cumulative with one another, which also serves to identify low volatility flashpoints from high volatility flashpoints; nonetheless, a single indicator with sufficient volatility in the context of contemporary relations, or in cultural contexts, between actors surrounding a dispute may carry the same weight as several others during periods of eased tensions.<sup>82</sup> As with flashpoints themselves, these indicators are durable and constructed, rather

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<sup>79</sup> (Maass 2021)

<sup>80</sup> (Gieczewski 2023)

<sup>81</sup> Such as: (Schwarz and Sonin 2007), (Carter and Goemans 2011), (Yamamoto 2019), (Miall 2007), (Kinsella and Russett 2002), (Kissinger 1994), (Braithwaite 2010), (Powell 2015)

<sup>82</sup> For example: a prominent member of a political community visiting a site in a disputed region, while ratcheting to a degree, does not necessarily indicate a flashpoint, especially if relations between actors is otherwise stable. However, this same visit in the context of the disputed area having religious significance for

than permanent; states can, and generally do, work to mitigate tensions between each other to avoid flashpoints from forming. In this way, as a flashpoint develops over time it is more likely to gain indicators on a pathway towards ignition and lose indicators on a pathway towards de-escalation and dissolution.

The list below separates these indicators into security, economic, and diplomatic/social categories and provides ten examples of each category. Many have been identified in earlier literature regarding conflict emergence, though these sources primarily focus on one of the above categories, or indeed only one indicator, rather than approaching the subject holistically.<sup>83</sup> While a narrow analysis on one indicator or one category certainly contributes to the understanding of conflict emergence, an appreciation of the broad field of factors which contribute to tensions between actors is important due to the reality that conflict is rarely begun over a single issue. Similar to the broader typology of flashpoints, the individual instance under analysis might show indicators evenly distributed across these categories, favoring some categories over others, or have some categories absent all together depending on contemporary contexts. These indicators mimic ratcheting events in the context of an established flashpoint.

### Security

*Securitization of issue(s)*- Political communities beginning/perpetuating the correlation of disputes to security/existential concerns.

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the party who is not the current occupant, perhaps even during a religious festival or season, can bear more indicative weight as this action would cause a greater, negative public response.

<sup>83</sup> For example: *Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms* (2005), *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism, and War* (1994), *Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict* (2002)



*Military Mobilization*- this indicator exists on a scale from minor/partial mobilization (ex. only in a particular region) to full mobilization (ex. all men aged 20 or older must report, etc.)

*Provocative military exercises/war games*- While these are regular facets of military maintenance and preparedness, in relation to indicating a flashpoint, these maneuvers take place close to disputed regions and borders, and as volatility increases, these maneuvers include larger numbers of troops and equipment.

*Presence of peacekeeping forces*- By definition, peacekeeping forces are deployed to areas of high tensions which often indicate flashpoints (though they can also be deployed in police keeping actions which are less indicative of a flashpoint existing, and more indicative of internal instability or a failed state).

*Specialized weapons testing*- Also a form of saber rattling/swagger, the publicized testing of the 'latest and greatest' which during the Cold War for example was the testing of atomic weaponry, in contemporary times this could include anti-satellite technology and various hypersonic artillery.

*Staging of equipment, deployment of A2/AD systems*- This indicates preparation for sustained conflict, with the former taking the shape of supply depots and deployed battle groups, and the latter with the intent to protect the staged equipment, and in the event of flashpoint ignition, to protect forward deployments.

*Skirmishes/border incursions* – In low volatility scenarios these can be isolated incidents (though nonetheless ratcheting), however in periods of high volatility these can prove to be preludes to

conflict. This indicator also includes limited strikes (generally by artillery or air)<sup>84</sup> which can focus on targets of opportunity (ex. a VIP or shipment of goods/weapons in transit) or on specific military targets (such as border defenses or A2/AD sites).

*Grey zone/hybrid warfare provocations* – This multi-form indicator has become an art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and includes hacking campaigns, disinformation campaigns (often conducted in cyberspace), lawfare, electoral interference, etc.

*Renewal/creation of security agreements*- As actors become more sensitive to the salience of conflict, they reach out to existing security partners and court new partners in order to deter aggression, or juxtaposed to this, seek new security partners reassurance from existing partners for joint military action.

*Defense spending increases* – While budget increases are a regular facet of governance, in periods of increasing tensions governments will give priority to military spending in-step with the perception of imminent conflict.

### Economic

*Trade Sanctions/Embargoes* - As tensions ratchet states will employ trade sanctions and embargos to exert coercive pressure on those they are in dispute with; an indicator of volatility is the amount of economic pain a state is willing to put their own economy through in order to continue these coercive efforts.

*Energy resource restrictions* - The limiting or restriction on the delivery or flow of energy resources (such as hydrocarbons or electricity) to another actor; this can have unintended

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<sup>84</sup> For example, Israeli strikes into Lebanon, Syria, etc. to strike at targets of opportunity/high value targets.

secondary effects on ‘down pipeline’ customer states who might involve themselves in the dispute in order to return the flow of energy resources to the status quo.

*Suspension of economic activity* - This indicator is a spectrum from limited suspension, such as in strategic sectors for calculated coercion, to a full halting of bi-lateral economic activity.

*Investment/asset freezes/seizures* – Especially employed by core states with economic clout, this indicator includes freezing/seizing of offshored assets, withdrawal of grant or aid programs, and the halting or withdrawal of investment programs, such as joint-development of a resource extraction project.

*Market fluctuations/speculation* – As tensions grow towards a flashpoint and possible conflict, the modern capitalist system, by grace of instant communication and risk assessment, reacts to safeguard its profits and assets which causes reverberating market fluctuations regionally, and in the case of substantial tensions, across the world-system.

*Currency volatility* – Similar to the above, volatility in the value of an actor or actors’ currency indicates that market forces perceive that a potential conflict could make holding a particular currency(ies) risky. Additionally, citizens of these countries could opt to exchange national currency for more global currencies (US dollar, Euro, Yen, etc.) in expectation of devaluation due to conflict. Similarly, a state forbidding the exchanging of their currency among citizens for foreign currency, in relation to tensions as this also occurs during economic crisis, is an indicator that a flashpoint has formed.

*Rise in shipping insurance premiums* – Global shipping firms increase the cost of insuring shipments which pass through volatile areas, or which make port in such areas. The increase in premium correlates with the threat of losses (ex. shipping goods to a port in Ukraine or Russia

via the Black Sea during their conflict). A rise in premiums in the context of heating tensions could indicate a flashpoint has formed.

*Disruption of the tourism/travel industry* – By either home or host country, the restriction of travel in its many forms and purposes can indicate a flashpoint has formed between actors which restricts another state's citizens from legal travel to their own state.

*Boycott campaigns* – Promoted by grassroots organizations or by governments, campaigns to restrict the consumption of products from a specific state can indicate a flashpoint has formed, the adherence to and fervor of these campaigns (one product of the 'foe' state, or all products) indicates volatility.

*Expulsion/removal from financial instruments/institutions/processing systems* – Also employed by core states due to the exclusivity of controlling global financial systems, this indicator references the exclusion of an actor from banking networks, financial markets, and processing systems such as the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT).

#### Diplomatic/social

*Breakdown of diplomatic talks* – In an effort to mitigate tensions, states will hold bi-lateral or multilateral talks to address key points of contention. The breakdown of these talks, either the suspension or outright withdrawal, is an indicator that a flashpoint has formed, or is imminent.

*Expulsion of diplomats* – Even during times of disagreement, diplomats, the formal representatives of a state, remain in country at their postings in order to facilitate talks, manage visas, and the other multitude of responsibilities of modern diplomatic corps. The expulsion of these diplomats, either selectively or whole missions, indicates a flashpoint is likely present with the size of the expulsion relating to the volatility of the dispute.

*Publicized condemnation/ declaration of conflictual intents by political community* – Directed speech acts, which can be imagined as spoken saber rattling, from a political community targeting another actor. The tone of these speech acts, from a strongly worded statement to rallying cries, can indicate volatility.

*Targeted public propaganda campaigns* – Similar to the above, these speech acts in a consumable form for the wider public can be employed to coax hostile public sentiment towards an actor. Again, their tone and message indicates volatility.

*Public demonstrations/disorder* – Public manifestations of ill-will towards another actor can indicate a flashpoint has formed or is forming. These demonstrations themselves are on a volatility scale from peaceful, though directed, protests (such as in front of an embassy), to riots which target neighborhoods where citizens of this actor live, or businesses owned by these citizens or controlled by the actor.

*Halting of visa processing/change in policy* – Disruptions to the regular processing of visas, or the regulations which they are issued under, to students, diplomats, tourists, and others is indicative of ratcheting tensions and a possible flashpoint.

*Public peace movements* – Sensitive to ratcheting tensions, the citizenry of an actor might publicly protest the maneuvers of their government towards conflict. The size and activity of these movements can indicate a flashpoint's volatility.

*Courting of extra-regional actors* – Similar to the 'renewal/creation of security agreements' security indicator, the courting of extra-regional actors for partiality in a dispute indicates that a flashpoint has or is forming, as the seeking actor perceives their support as necessary for their own prospects.

*Public sector boycott campaigns* – State sanctioned or rooted in public protest, boycotts can be across several public sectors such as academia, cross-cultural institutions, or public cultural institutions.

*Crisis diplomacy*- This indicator can occur even in the event of the aforementioned breakdown in diplomatic talks and indicate the existence of a high volatility flashpoint’s inception or imminent ignition as a ‘final’ effort to avoid the emergence of conflict. In the modern world-system these crisis meetings can take place in person, through shuttle diplomacy, or via telecommunications.

*Table 2 Indicators in Flashpoint Diagnostic*

<b>Security</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Diplomatic/social</b>
Securitization of issue(s)	Trade sanctions/embargos	Breakdown of diplomatic talks
Military mobilization	Energy resource restrictions	Expulsion of diplomats
Provocative military exercises/war games	Suspension of economic activity	Publicized condemnation/declaration of conflictual intents by a political community
Presence of peacekeeping forces	Investment/asset freezes/seizures	Targeted public propaganda campaigns
Specialized weapons testing	Market fluctuations/speculation	Public demonstrations/disorder
Staging of equipment/deployment of A2/AD systems	Currency volatility	Halting of visa processing/change of policy
Skirmishes/border incursions	Rise in shipping insurance premiums	Public peace movements
Grey zone/hybrid warfare provocations	Disruption of the tourism/travel industry	Courting of extra-regional actors
Renewal/creation of security agreements	Boycott campaigns	Public sector boycott campaigns
Defense spending increases	Expulsion/removal from financial instruments/institutions/processing systems	Crisis diplomacy

### 3.5 Conclusion

Flashpoints are one of the most important, yet least understood phenomenon in social science from an academic perspective. They exist in a surprising plurality in the world-system, as shown by Anderson, yet in-depth literature regarding flashpoints is largely absent as was mentioned by Hoyt. Elucidating the nature of flashpoints is an essential and pertinent issue, both in regard to filling a gap in the academic understanding of the phenomenon, but also due to the present state of geopolitics in the world-system where the risk of conflict is increasingly commonplace. In addition to summarizing the contributions of Anderson, Hoyt, and other authors to the field, this chapter identifies key characteristics of flashpoints as social phenomenon and details many of the contributing factors which make them such consequential aspects of international relations. As well, it applies findings from the study of crowd disorder to the field of international relations to elucidate parallels between conflict erupting between crowds and police, and the genesis of conflict between states.

Most notably it discusses the types of disputes where flashpoints find their inception, namely: territorial, political, and socio-economic, each with their own sub-categories to which further offers insights into the drivers of contention between actors. As well the multidimensional nature of flashpoints was discussed, wherein several of the above categories of disputes are often interwoven to create a gestalt of tension between actors which complicates de-escalation and opens the flashpoint to a greater number of potential catalysts. This contributes to the overall durability of flashpoints which sees, as a matter of face saving and zero-sum thinking, political communities passing flashpoints from one generation to another in many cases which stretch back decades or even centuries. However, this durability should not be mistaken for inertness, flashpoints are inherently volatile phenomena which can be stochastically gauged on a spectrum

from those which are able to be compartmentalized by actors, to those which are susceptible to ignition after a single ratcheting event. Additionally, the human factor of flashpoint construction has been analyzed, highlighting their dual constructive-realist nature which in principle allows actors to consciously deescalate tensions surrounding flashpoints, yet these efforts are often stymied by the geopolitical realities of an inherently anarchic world-system. As was demonstrated by the diagnostic developed in this chapter, a number of indicators exist which can identify flashpoints at various stages of development; it is these indicators to which political communities must be sensitive to, and analysts aware of, in order to avoid the pathways toward conflict.

#### **4 High and Low volatility flashpoints**

The case studies which follow this chapter demonstrate flashpoints on opposing ends of the spectrum of volatility, with the Arctic presented as a flashpoint of low volatility and the South China Sea as one of high volatility; these labels denote the predisposition of a flashpoint to ignition. Similar to flashpoints as phenomenon, high and low volatility flashpoints are individually unique due to the circumstances which led to their inception; however important generalizations can be made regarding their nature which can lead to insights regarding ratcheting, de-escalation, trajectory, and possible ignition. These generalizations are approached through economic, security, and diplomatic lenses which provide a broad scope of internal and external actions and interactions between actors involved in a flashpoint. Actors involved in flashpoints will apply a mix of strategies from these three domains which most suit their comparative strengths, often in conjunction, to further their own goals and limit the advantages of others.



## 4.1 Parallels with Crowd Disorder

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, important parallels between crowd disorder and geopolitical flashpoints can be made which provides examples of the dynamics of collective entities involved in pre-conflict (or ‘pre-riot’ in studies of crowd disorder).<sup>85</sup> Similar to crowds, and what turns a protest into a riot, the ratcheting which moves a flashpoint down the spectrum of volatility from low to high is relative to the context in which it occurs.<sup>86</sup> The predisposition of actors involved in a flashpoint to interpret events as either ratcheting (called an ‘intensifier’ by Waddington and ‘crowd mood’ by other authors in the field)<sup>87</sup> or as an isolated event is dependent on the casual chain which preceded it and the contemporary relations between the actors, be they police and citizens or states in the world-system. Probing air defense identification zones (ADIZ)<sup>88</sup> during periods of low volatility can be perceived as provocative, but not ratcheting, while in periods of high volatility this could be seen as inviting confrontation and potentially a kinetic response; similarly, deploying police to the scene of a protest can be interpreted as a reasonable precaution of law and order by protestors, however a high-profile police presence, such as one which includes the conspicuous display of riot control technology, was found by Waddington to be perceived as provocative by crowds and could invite disorder.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, in situations where crowds are already predisposed to disorder (such as after previous engagements with authorities), the inclination of either authorities or the crowds themselves towards accommodation<sup>90</sup> lowers or altogether disappears; the same is true of geopolitical

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<sup>85</sup> (Waddington, Jones and Critcher 1989, 9)

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 157

<sup>87</sup> (D. P. Waddington 2010, 346) (Zeitzi, Tan and Zeitzi 2009)

<sup>88</sup> This occurs when militaries test the reaction times of another country's radars, air defense systems, or general military readiness by flying close to or into their ADIZ.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 345

<sup>90</sup> In the context of crowd disorder, this term describes the negotiation between crowds and police (consciously or otherwise) to avoid direct conflict.

flashpoints, wherein actors involved in low intensity flashpoints are still able to find mutual points of agreement which can lead to de-escalation, where as in high intensity flashpoints actors find it difficult, if not impossible to find common ground to begin fruitful negotiations or trust building measures.<sup>91</sup> There is an important parallel to be drawn between the capacity for crowds and police, and for geopolitical actors, to be able to “read” one another; similar to a fog of war which makes the interpretation of other states’ actions difficult, possibly leading to unintended ratcheting due what was devised as a benign action, police and crowds are unable to know the true intent of one another which can lead to misunderstandings and disorder due to misperceptions.<sup>92</sup> This inability to read an opposing group or to understand the motivation for their actions can promote not only ratcheting, but can begin the final casual chain towards flashpoint ignition (called by Waddington a *succession of incidents*).<sup>93</sup> Waddington found that this mutual unintelligibility between groups, importantly the perception of the rationale behind the opposing group’s actions, can mobilize a “spate of mutual violence and recrimination”:<sup>94</sup>

*Actions which more or less guarantee retaliation, such as throwing bricks at police officers or forcibly dispersing a crowd, are particularly strong signals that accommodation has broken down. They are as much effects as causes of the breakdown of order. Those involved rarely perceive the logic of each others' actions: 'suddenly bricks were thrown at officers'; 'the police charged us for no reason'. Such actions do have a rationale, however invisible to the other side. They are part of a pattern less obvious to immediate perceptions than subsequent analysis.*<sup>95</sup>

Finally, the matter of de-escalation is discussed in crowd disorder literature which focuses on groups stepping down from confrontation consciously. Waddington discusses how in a desire to avoid violence, groups can seek to minimize disorder through negotiation, often on the police

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 346

<sup>92</sup> (King and Waddington 2005, 259)

<sup>93</sup> (D. P. Waddington 2010, 346)

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 346

<sup>95</sup> (Waddington, Jones and Critcher 1989, 166)

side through specialized officers with expertise in disorder with the crowd being represented by protest organizers (an important caveat being that the crowd must recognize the authority of the organizers).<sup>96</sup> The necessity of identifying routes towards de-escalation in crowds is recognized by private security firms as well, such as Accord Security based in Western Australia which provides security services to public events, who state in their webpage ‘Deciphering the Dynamics: Unraveling the Psychology behind Effective Crowd Control’:

*Preventing riots involves addressing the root causes and key triggers that can spark unrest. Accord Security conducts thorough risk assessments to identify potential flashpoints and areas of concern. By addressing socioeconomic issues, communication gaps, or other factors contributing to tension, we work towards defusing potential conflicts before they escalate.<sup>97</sup>*

In geopolitical flashpoints this takes the shape of crisis diplomacy wherein during times of eminent conflict diplomatic teams, often including experts on both the parties themselves and the relevant drivers of tensions, will meet to avert an outbreak of conflict.

## **4.2 Low volatility flashpoints**

Low volatility flashpoints are foci of geopolitical tension where the likelihood of kinetic conflict is comparatively low and, while tensions exist in regard to the issues which led to the creation of a flashpoint, they would require a period of ratcheting before an ignition event could occur.

Flashpoints with low volatility are comparatively stable, with actors’ policies preferring dialogue, intrigue, and grandstanding over potentially destabilizing saber rattling and antagonization. If examined through the lens of securitization, the durable patterns of enmity between the actors

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<sup>96</sup> (King and Waddington 2005, 262-263)

<sup>97</sup> (Accord Security 2023)

involved in the dispute have not reached a level of tension where an ignition event is likely to occur.<sup>98</sup>

This is not to allude to a lack of animosity between actors, as tension must exist to create a flashpoint. Rather, in a circumstance of low volatility the underlying issues which drive the flashpoint have not yet reached a stage where they will be viewed as existential by relevant actors which would prompt a resistance to settlement. This leaves sufficient capacity for trust building and dialogue which can relieve tension, either reaching a consensus on lowering the temperature of a flashpoint or addressing the underlying issues which led to its inception in a manner which could lead to the flashpoint dissolving.<sup>99</sup> As these issues lack an enduring existential nature, actors involved in a low volatility flashpoint may still cooperate in other economic and geopolitical arenas.

In the economic, security, and diplomatic domains, actors work to gain an advantage over one another in pursuit of a settlement or status-quo which favors their agenda, while avoiding escalation around the flashpoint; in this sense, the dynamics between actors can be imagined as competitive rather than conflictual. Actors will favor the particular domains in which they perceive they have the most leverage in relation to others involved in the flashpoint and try to compensate for the advantages of others; these advantages are not static and shift over time with larger developments within the world-system. Additionally, actors may choose not to press certain advantages they hold in order to avoid what could be considered to be overtly aggressive by others which would lead to flashpoint ratcheting.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 47)

<sup>99</sup> (Wrighton 2022, 16-30)

<sup>100</sup> (Steele 2019)

### *Low volatility economics*

The world-system is more heavily interconnected economically than in any other period in human history, from periphery to core it is the trade of goods, resources, and services which links states to one another and drives many aspects of international relations; in this way economics is a useful tool for competition between states. In its application as a tool, economics offers states a means to assert a calculated degree of pressure on one another in order to coerce concessions (political, economic, or otherwise) or to bolster their own economic standing in relation to others. Often this takes the shape of protectionist trade measures, such as selective embargoes and tariffs, or the subsidization of domestic industries, in addition to others.<sup>101</sup>

Modern economics takes place in a liberal ecosystem with a complexity of regulations and norms which, in theory, provide an even playing field for states across the core-periphery spectrum. These are designed to prevent ‘unfair’ practices such as dumping, uncompetitive subsidization, aggressive protectionism, and other means by which states can gain an advantage over one another in global markets.<sup>102</sup> In practice however, states use economics as a tool to leverage their interests on both the regional and global level as well as to coerce favorable policies in other states. The ability to employ economics as a tool is limited to both a state’s own internal economic health as well as their place in the wider world economy; the tool is also augmented by particular economic niches a state might fill.<sup>103</sup> This is often seen in states limiting the export of strategic resources (hydrocarbons, rare earths, electricity, etc.), manufactured goods (primarily

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<sup>101</sup> (Baldwin 2020)

<sup>102</sup> The largest paragon of this liberal ecosystem is the World Trade Organization which states its purpose is to “operate the global system of trade rules and helps developing countries build their trade capacity. It also provides a forum for its members to negotiate trade agreements and to resolve the trade problems they face with each other.” (World Trade Organization n.d.)

<sup>103</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 7-10)

high-value industrial products) and intellectual property (technology and industrial designs). States involved in low volatility flashpoints often have interlinking economic systems due to their geographic proximity and must calculate trade-offs when using coercive economics. Policies designed to gain leverage can both ratchet tensions around the flashpoint as well as have blowback into domestic economics which can affect internal stability.

Actors are limited in many aspects regarding the application of these tools by their membership in regulatory bodies such as the World Trade Organization and signatory status on different multilateral economic agreements. As relations surrounding a low volatility flashpoint have not yet reached conflictual levels, it is unlikely that an actor would risk reprisal from a regulatory body (and its members) in the name of applying excessive economic pressure on a rival.

However, there are some avenues which actors can pursue which can still provide leverage against others, many of which involve territorial sovereignty. Fishing restrictions, for example, can be used against competing states by limiting or outright banning access to an actor's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>104</sup> Similarly, border restrictions can be put in place which can limit the migration of pastoral groups or ban the use of strategic geographic choke points for trade and transit.<sup>105</sup> Both of these examples would ratchet tensions and could prompt outside powers to push for a settlement, as the collateral economic effects could cause a cascading action on a regional level which could not only push the actors involved in the flashpoint closer to conflict but also draw in others to the flashpoint; as well, these actions severely affect the livelihoods of populations which rely on these economic sectors which could prompt humanitarian disasters or unpredictable instability. Less ratcheting economic strategies could

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<sup>104</sup> (Spijkers, et al. 2019)

<sup>105</sup> (Faiez 2024)

also include increasing the regulatory bureaucracy of doing business, such as importing and exporting or the selling of services, which would make economic activities more difficult for a rival without explicit hostility.

Economic competition is the most common form of strategic interaction between flashpoint actors as well as between actors in broader international dynamics, indeed even between actors throughout the world-system who are allied and otherwise share close ties.<sup>106</sup> The difference lies in the directed nature of the applied economic policies towards other actors involved in the flashpoint with the goal of coercion to settle a dispute, as opposed to more broad economic policies enacted which treat others in a less partisan manner.

#### *Low volatility security*

While low volatility flashpoints require ratcheting before ignition, this does not exclude a security dimension from existing. Indeed, for a flashpoint to exist a degree of securitization must have taken place on the issues surrounding the flashpoint's inception.<sup>107</sup> Certainly this securitization is more salient in high volatility flashpoints, however it is still an important aspect of low volatility relations and is the domain which poses the greatest threat to stability.

Low volatility security is a balance between defensive readiness and aggressive posturing with states moving between the two given the current temperature of a flashpoint. Rhetoric focuses on ideas of 'readiness' and maintaining a minimum credible defense in relation to others involved in the flashpoint. Weapons programs (either indigenous production or foreign procurement) are not on a war footing and are organized for two main purposes: national security and status.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> (Brown and Russ 2021)

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 70-76

<sup>108</sup> (Dunne and Skons 2014)

Beginning with national security, in peripheral actors this term is often synonymous with internal security concerns, and these programs often are geared to address security issues focusing on irregular warfare, such as combating terrorism or insurgency/rebellion. For core actors involved in low volatility flashpoints, who are less likely to have such ‘hot’ internal security, their programs focus on research and development (R&D) to replace aging hardware or to counter perceived advances by near-peer powers in order to maintain minimum credible defense.<sup>109</sup> For both core and peripheral actors these national security issues are not often targeted at specific states, at least not by name, which would potentially cause ratcheting. Rather there are allusions to opposing actors in internal narratives regarding national security, such as a peripheral actor accusing other states of not effectively tackling insurgency issues within their own borders which is ‘bleeding’ into their own, or in the case of a core actor, justifying a weapons program as avoiding “falling behind” a near-peer with existing tensions.

Secondly, status is an additional goal of weapons programs.<sup>110</sup> Over the past several years the academic study of status within the realm of international relations has grown considerably, with diverse theoretical and methodological works applying broader scopes than works from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing state-level status in relation to international organizations, power transition and emergence, and the foreign policy of small states, in addition to the topic of weapons systems acquisitions. This work applies a synthesized definition of status which was created from an organized review of leading recent literature on status by Elias Gotz, namely that status is “*a recognized position of deference in the international hierarchy*”.<sup>111</sup> In this same work Gotz

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<sup>109</sup> (Bromley and Guevara 2014)

<sup>110</sup> (O'Neill 2006)

<sup>111</sup> (Gotz 2021, 228-229)



identifies the acquisition of modern weapons systems as an important way for states to gain status, due to the inherent insecurity in international politics.<sup>112</sup>

Status seeking through weapons programs periods of low volatility not only entails acquiring new weapons systems, a state must also showcase these new assets to the international community and most importantly to others in the flashpoint. This takes its shape in ‘swagger’, which was defined by Robert Art as:

*...displaying one's military might at military exercises and national demonstrations and buying or building the era's most prestigious weapons. The swagger use of force is the most egoistic: it aims to enhance the national pride of a people or to satisfy the personal ambitions of its ruler. A state or statesman swaggers in order to look and feel more powerful and important, to be taken seriously by others in the councils of international decision-making, to enhance the nation's image in the eyes of others. If its image is enhanced, the nation's defense, deterrent, and compellent capabilities may also be enhanced<sup>113</sup>*

This work applies a definition of swagger in line with Art’s, namely a means for actors to grandstand to one another without straying into the realm of saber rattling. In this category, the military exercises and national demonstrations described by Art maintain a defensive nature, aimed at a specter of an international aggressor which is purposefully vague. Though undertones in national narratives might clearly point towards the identity of this specter, the lack of an overt direction for the swagger allows for a cognitive dissonance between states as a mutual understanding of statecraft. The goal of swagger is twofold, it both raises the status internationally of a state by way of hallmarking the economic and/or scientific capacity to deploy near-peer or advanced weaponry, but also successfully works as a deterrence against kinetic action by flashpoint rivals. Revisionist states are often the most proactive regarding swagger which can drift into saber rattling; for comparatively defensive oriented states this deterrence

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid pp. 237

<sup>113</sup> (Art 1980, 10-11)

from swagger serves to caution others that ratcheting actions which lead towards flashpoint ignition would be an attempt to swallow a poison frog.<sup>114</sup>

### *Low volatility diplomacy*

The issues which surround flashpoints often become internationalized with actors from across the world-system involving themselves to various degrees; the number of these outside powers and their level of involvement often corresponds to the likelihood of disruptions to the global community should a flashpoint ignite. The diplomatic involvement of outside powers and their courting by flashpoint actors in regional competition is heavily connected to the previous two areas of analysis discussed, often inseparably. Having the favor of other states in regard to the issues surrounding a flashpoint bolsters an actor's own position, as opposing actors must now factor in the perceptions of third parties which might not only be supporting a competitor in their regional goals but might also have grand strategic objectives of their own.

Low volatility diplomacy, temporarily setting aside the economic and security aspects, takes its shape in flashpoint actors seeking the public acknowledgement by outside powers of their partiality towards one actor in the underlying disputes of a flashpoint. With the inclusion of economics and security, low volatility diplomacy involves the courting of outside powers to supply materiel (funding, weapons, etc.) or to withhold materiel from others in addition to seeking partiality or preventing others from receiving partiality. The actors involved in the flashpoint prefer overt partiality from outside powers as it both bolsters their standing in relation to the flashpoint, but also serves a public relations function in ensuring the citizenry that the government's position has 'allies' regarding the issues surrounding a dispute. Less-than-overt

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<sup>114</sup> (Dougherty, Matuschak and Hunter 2021)

partiality is often preferred by outside powers as it involves fewer prestige liabilities, and fewer push/pull factors should a flashpoint move further down the spectrum of volatility. The degree to which an outside power would support an actor in their dispute is dependent on a number of factors, including the overall volatility of the flashpoint, historical connections, existing geopolitical connections, and their own strategic goals in the region. These outside powers can also be broadly placed into two categories: regional, meaning within the RSC(s) the flashpoint exists in or in close proximity, and extra-regional, meaning actors from further afield.

Between regional and extra-regional actors, regional actors are by definition more likely to be impacted by events surrounding the flashpoint. Shared borders, interlinking economies, an intimate history of amenity and enmity, along with other geopolitical aspects of proximity, are pull factors for regional actors to involve themselves in the affairs of a flashpoint.<sup>115</sup> The diplomatic competition by flashpoint actors for their partiality can be on a bi-lateral or a multi-lateral basis with the latter taking place in forums such as the Association for Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) or the East African Community (EAC). Regional actors can be courted for their economic or military strengths as well as for the political influence they hold with either other flashpoint actors or with other outside powers which an actor in the flashpoint might view as leading to advantageous networking. Since involvement in a flashpoint comes at a cost, such as material or negative relations with another actor, regional actors could be apprehensive regarding public statements of partiality. For this reason, regional actors who do not have an immediate benefit to showing partiality are likely to maintain public neutrality on the matter or the professionally vague “call for dialogues” on issues.

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<sup>115</sup> (Starr 2005)

Extra-regional actors are largely limited to great powers and middle powers as the global economic and military power projection capabilities involved in influencing a distant flashpoint is both economically and militarily taxing beyond which most peripheral actors are able to support or justify towards their citizenry.<sup>116</sup> The partiality of an extra-regional power is coveted by flashpoint actors and competition over their favor could be more intense than over those of a regional actor given the benefits at stake. Especially in flashpoints involving peripheral actors, the weight of an extra-regional power via penetration could significantly tip the balance of power in the favor of a particular actor which can coerce concessions from others.<sup>117</sup> The public act of a great power showing partiality could itself cause others involved in a flashpoint to second-guess potentially ratcheting moves in a way which bolsters an actor's positioning. An extra-regional actor's military sophistication is another strong draw for to court their partiality. In the case of peripheral flashpoints, the hardware which more advanced extra-regional powers might provide is often of a level which is unmatched by others involved in the flashpoint, improving the efficacy of swagger and deterrence. Even if the advanced hardware remains in command of the extra-regional actor and is only acting in a supportive role, such as espionage or battlefield intelligence, this strategic edge can overcome numerical disadvantages in peripheral or semi-peripheral near-peer conflict.<sup>118</sup> Their economic support, which includes investments and technology transfers, can also give flashpoint actors a leading edge in comparison with others in the dispute, either in competitive industries or as a means to develop military hardware. An extra-regional actor's support is often tied to their wider grand strategy which involves specific outcomes regarding the flashpoint and region in question, long-term or otherwise. Additionally,

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<sup>116</sup> Historical exceptions do exist, again such as Cuba's support to Angola during Operation Carlota in the mid-1970s.

<sup>117</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 46)

<sup>118</sup> (Common 2022)

an extra-regional actor could involve themselves in a low volatility flashpoint with an agenda to ‘solve’ the underlying disputes as a facet of a wider grand strategy. If successfully executed, this gives the extra-regional power a boost in their global prestige and in itself could be a grand strategic goal to be viewed by the world-system as a ‘peace maker’.

Outside powers are not always welcome, however. In low volatility flashpoints states might also work to exclude outside powers from involving themselves in the dispute or other regional affairs; this in itself can be a road to common ground between actors.<sup>119</sup> A consensus can exist which views the involvement of extra-regional actors as a de-stabilizing force which could ratchet tensions for a number of reasons. As will be shown in the case of the Arctic, this is not always a holistic rejection of outside involvement in regional affairs, rather a clear distinction of agency in the stewardship of affairs in the flashpoint. Flashpoint actors could also reject outside involvement on the grounds that the grand strategic goals of an extra-regional power are irrelevant to or threatening to the stability of the flashpoint and/or the region. This is especially true when involving great powers, or in the case of purely peripheral flashpoints the inclusion of middle powers. Conversely, involving regional actors who are not directly involved in the issues surrounding the flashpoint can be courted by all actors involved to function as an arbiter between competitors. An example of this can be seen in the African Union’s (AU) work to stabilize flashpoints around the continent.<sup>120</sup> Viewed as an unbiased third party, the AU can mediate negotiations, or act as a peace keeping force if diplomatic solutions are found to be unviable. This reflects a general notion within low volatility flashpoints that ratcheting has negative

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<sup>119</sup> (Mahbubani 2023) (Acharya 2023)

<sup>120</sup> (Allen 2023)

consequences and that mediation, or at the very least stagnation, is preferable to moving closer towards high volatility and flashpoint ignition.

### 4.3 Contemporary low volatility flashpoints

In addition to the Arctic, which is described in detail in the following chapter, the following are low volatility flashpoints in the contemporary world-system; this list is not meant to be exhaustive, rather it is intended to highlight the most dynamic flashpoints of this category. The states highlighted in blue are considered to be central actors to the flashpoint.

#### Liancourt Rocks

In the sea which lies between the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula, a small maritime feature is disputed between the Koreans<sup>121</sup> and Japan. Called ‘Dokdo’ by Koreans, ‘Takeshima’ by Japan, and ‘the Liancourt Rocks’ by much of the rest of the world, this feature is currently occupied by South Korea and appears frequently in Korean state propaganda alongside post-colonial discourse, and even a popular dance song, directed at Japan. Though the dispute has not heavily disrupted



bi-lateral relations, it continues to be a securitized point of contention for both parties, especially from the Korean side.<sup>122</sup> As in other aspects of South Korea-Japan relations, the United States’ security alliance with both parties, which are separate from each other through the San Francisco System,<sup>123</sup> continues to mediate relations between Tokyo and Seoul. In addition to this, South

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<sup>121</sup> While North Korea also asserts its rights to Dokdo, South Korea due to its more dynamic position in the world-system is the primary advocate of the Korean people’s claim to the maritime feature.

<sup>122</sup> (Starkweather 2023)

<sup>123</sup> Also known as Hub and Spoke

Korea and Japan's extensive economic relations also buffers tensions which could possibly escalate if there was not such extensive economic interdependence.

### Eastern Mediterranean Sea Boundaries

Primarily a dispute between Turkey and Greece, but also involving Egypt, Libya, and Cyprus, concerning the demarcation of maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

In addition to centuries of nationalistic antagonism on all sides, the dispute is driven by the potential resources which lie under the seabed (primarily hydrocarbons). Tensions



are kept in check largely due to Greece and Turkey's mutual membership in the NATO alliance, though swagger and diplomatic competition over claim recognition continues.<sup>124</sup>

### Kuril Islands

A small chain of islands running from the north of Hokkaido to the tip of the Kamchatka

Peninsula is disputed between Japan and Russia and have been occupied by the latter since the end of the Second World War. Though the issue has been securitized by each party (and are still technically at war as no peace treaty was ever signed),<sup>125</sup> the dispute has not become existential



for either as the islands are both remote and sparsely populated. Increasingly nationalistic

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<sup>124</sup> (Tanchum 2021) (Dalay 2021)

<sup>125</sup> (Osborn 2024)

narratives in Japan have promoted the idea of taking a more forceful stance over the islands while Russia's war in Ukraine has left it with fewer security assets to defend the islands and the small Russian population which now reside on them.<sup>126</sup>

Cyprus- Following a period of inter-ethnic violence and a Turkish invasion in 1974, the island of Cyprus has been divided between the EU member state the Republic of Cyprus (~60%), the nearly universally unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (~36%)<sup>127</sup>, and UN buffer zones and British military bases which occupy the remainder of the island. Enmity continues to exist among the parties at differing levels, and while significant ratcheting would be necessary for ignition, high securitization around the dispute over the island's sovereignty remains. The stability of the flashpoint can be traced to Cyprus' membership in the EU and the presence of British peacekeepers, both of which have done much to prevent the island from returning to a high volatility flashpoint.

#### **4.4 High Volatility Flashpoints**

As was previously mentioned, what differentiates high volatility and low volatility flashpoints is the likelihood of flashpoint ignition leading to kinetic conflict. In situations of high volatility relations between actors show tense patterns of enmity which have made de-escalatory and trust building measures, such as negotiation, less fruitful and possibly impotent. In cases where a flashpoint has moved to the far end of the volatility spectrum, a single ratcheting event can cause ignition.

In high volatility flashpoints the underlying disputes have reached a stage where they are viewed as existential by actors, who are increasingly resistant to, or outright unwilling, to compromise

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<sup>126</sup> (Kaczynski 2020)

<sup>127</sup> Recognized only by Turkey.



on a settlement. This inflexibility creates the salience of conflict, where military action is viewed not as a last resort, but as a viable, and in some cases preferable option to negotiation. Despite their existential nature to actors, high volatility flashpoints can have a considerable lifespan, such as those surrounding the Korean Peninsula and the Kashmir flashpoints which have existed since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, when a flashpoint has survived for multiple generations it can become intertwined with national identity, deepening the existential imperative which exists and further removing the flashpoint from the ability to cool to state of lower volatility or for the flashpoint to be resolved altogether.

During periods of high volatility, the actors involved in the flashpoint jostle with one another in the same three areas as during periods of lower volatility: economic, security, and diplomatic. Similarly, these areas are the means by which actors work to gain an advantage over one another in pursuit of a settlement or status-quo which favors their agenda, normally asserting themselves in areas where they hold advantages over others. However, unlike low volatility flashpoints, during times of high volatility actors do not always seek to mitigate ratcheting events, indeed in times where one actor perceives itself to have an advantage over others it might purposefully stoke tensions in order to ignite the flashpoint while it maintains a strategic edge. In contrast to discourse surrounding a low volatility flashpoint, in times of high volatility actors will be overt regarding the targets of their economic, security, and diplomatic maneuvers on the international stage. In this way relations surrounding a high volatility flashpoint can be thought of as conflictual, rather than the competition of low volatility.

*High volatility economics*

Economic interactions between actors during periods of high volatility present a significant interruption in the normal flow of goods and services between states. Tools such as blanket embargoes and sanctions, restricting or denying the use of EEZs or airspace, or travel bans, among others, are employed to not only coerce other actors, but also to inflict economic hardship. In the highly globalized and interconnected 21<sup>st</sup> century, world-system economics have become an effective weapon against other states in lieu of kinetic conflict.<sup>128</sup>

Similar to economic competition, economic conflict is limited by an actor's own capacity to exert pressure and to weather potentially significant blow-back on their own internal economics. While actors who control strategic resources such as hydrocarbons or rare earth minerals, or strategic industries such as semi-conductors are well positioned to engage in economic conflict, those who lack such important commodities, namely peripheral states dependent on agriculture, have few options to inflict the necessary economic pain to coerce others. Likewise, actors which rely heavily on imports and/or lack the internal capacity to manufacture replacements are particularly susceptible to economic conflict. For core actors engaging in economic conflict with peripheral or semi-peripheral actors their control over global financial institutions is a powerful tool to coerce others into concessions, both in their ability to sanction individuals as well as the ability to restrict access to government funds which might have been offshored in more peaceful times.<sup>129</sup>

The fallout from high volatility economics is rarely limited to the actors involved and can affect regional as well as potentially global economics relative to the economic weight of the actors in

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<sup>128</sup> (Farrell and Newman 2019)

<sup>129</sup> For example: during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Western powers froze hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of Russian assets being held in Western accounts, not only as a tool of coercion designed to weaken Moscow's economic capacity, but also potentially as a way to fund Ukrainian operations. (Neal 2024)

dispute. Should, for example, coastal country A impose a complete embargo on all trade from country B entering its ports, landlocked country C which uses country A as an entrepôt will then have its own trade affected by this embargo requiring it to find alternate trade routes for its economic relationship with B. Similarly, should core country A impose strict financial sanctions on semi-peripheral country B, peripheral country C which uses country B's financial services due to a lack of internal capacity is inadvertently affected, and might face sanctions of their own from country A for breaking the sanctions on country B. While adjustments can be made to avoid collateral damage to others, heavy-handedness itself can be a tool for coercion. Third party actors which are facing economic hardship due to economic conflict between others will pressure actors targeted by economic conflict to come to a resolution out of concern for their own economic stability. Conversely, it can also push similarly sanctioned actors together to form trading blocs which can circumvent, compensate, or outright ignore powerful and coordinated sanction regimes.<sup>130</sup>

Economic conflict places pressure not only on the state as an institution, but also its citizenry; often coercive economic measures directed at the non-political community can be equally, if not more effective than those directed solely at those in positions of power and influence. Generally, this is not done out of malice (though potentially so if the securitization has become cultural) but rather due to the pressure the citizenry is able to exert on their own governments. Even in repressive societies where citizens lack the agency to affect national policy through their representatives, public protest in its various forms focusing on issues such as food and economic insecurity (bread and butter issues) can force governments to change course, if not for the

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<sup>130</sup> This can be seen with contemporary Russia, China, Iran, and other leading (and sanctioned) states networking to support one another against broad sanctions from the United States, the European Union, and others. (Notte 2023)

wellbeing of their people, then out of an interest in maintaining power. There are contemporary examples however of such strategies failing, such as the US embargo on Cuba and sanctions on Venezuela which have been able to weather economic hardship and continue to pursue their individual policies despite periods of public protest. Indeed, in some cases economic conflict targeted at impacting citizenry has backfired either by increasing public support of the government or lowering public support of the ‘attacking’ actor.<sup>131</sup> As well, should the value of a ‘global currency’ such as the US dollar, Russian Ruble, or Euro, which is used as a primary or secondary currency by other states, fall in value due to economic conflict, the financial impact will be felt by those which both use the currency in third countries, as well as those who send remittances in the currency to their home economics for exchange into local currency.<sup>132</sup> This directly reflects on local prices which can haphazardly fluctuate due to circumstances well beyond the control of both the government and citizenry of these third states which can foster patterns of enmity for both the state employing the sanctions as well as the state which is sanctioned in addition to the discontent from the citizenry which any state faces during economic hardship.<sup>133</sup>

### *High Volatility Security*

Security concerns and interactions in flashpoints of high volatility are by definition a delicate matter and hold the greatest potential for flashpoint ignition as swagger takes a more provocative

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<sup>131</sup> It can be argued that such economic conflict is a ‘long game’ with success only being determined by eventual outcomes. However, such as is the case with Cuba and the US where an embargo has existed for more than 60 years with no concessions on the Cuban side, the precise goal of intense economic conflict can be lost and pose political problems if it is imposed between core and peripheral states. As the US experiences with other American states as well as a growing portion of the international community, these can be seen as bullying rather than strategic coercion.

<sup>132</sup> (Trilling and Toktonaliev 2014)

<sup>133</sup> (Blank 2015)

form of saber rattling. As a flashpoint moves further down the volatility spectrum towards kinetic conflict the manner in which actors react towards one another becomes increasingly tense as all bi-/multilateral affairs are securitized. This increases the risk of flashpoint ignition as a single ratcheting event, such as entering air space, an accident at sea, or isolated skirmish, can quickly cascade out of control despite measures actors might implement to avoid ignition.

In the move from low to high volatility, actors invest more heavily in their militaries, both by acquiring more capable weapons systems but also in regard to recruiting, (taking the form of conscription or mobilization in extreme circumstances) and increasing civil defense training and preparedness. For peripheral actors, as opposed to acquiring smaller numbers of advanced weapons systems for status, minimum credible defense, and training during times of competition, as a flashpoint moves further up the volatility spectrum actors will seek to acquire these systems in bulk in preparation for what is perceived to be imminent kinetic conflict as well as outfit available forces for combat to the extent local innovation and resources permit.<sup>134</sup> For core actors experiencing the same rise in tensions, this is a period of increased production in their military-industrial complexes, however, as was seen in the first years of the Russo-Ukrainian war, after extended periods of peace these industries may have atrophied making scaling operations more cumbersome.<sup>135</sup> This difficulty centers on an ever-increasing technical sophistication of modern weapons systems which must not only be produced in specialized factories, as opposed to bygone eras where a car factory could be retooled to produce tanks, but also requires a highly educated and technical work force. Peripheral actors who do maintain a military-industrial complex, generally limited to small arms and ammunition manufacturing and obsolete core-like

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<sup>134</sup> (Kollars 2014)

<sup>135</sup> (Casert 2023) (Morris 2023)

systems, will similarly attempt to increase production, however this is relative to their economic and technological capacity to do so. In cases where economic conflict has perpetuated this could be unfeasible due to import embargoes (especially of specialized parts or resources) or a lack of liquid assets to pay for manufacturing. Peripheral actors who are unable to meet armament demands will seek asymmetrical weapon systems and strategies in an effort to re-balance a battlefield.<sup>136</sup>

States coping with security dilemma, wherein one actor's increase in military capacity leads others to increase their own out of fear of insecurity, can distort intentions through the fog of war; a security build-up in light of increased tensions surrounding a flashpoint could be intended as purely defensive by an actor experiencing a security dilemma, however in situations where ratcheting has strained relations and securitization has become cultural, a shield can be mistaken for a sword as the specter of conflict looms. Similarly, in studies of crowd disorder it has been found that police forces insuring themselves against a "worst case scenario" by amassing overwhelming manpower and equipment can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and encourage instances of disorder.<sup>137</sup>

As a flashpoint moves towards ignition at the edge of the volatility spectrum, the likelihood of skirmishes increases, which could act as triggering events should the flashpoint be unable to weather another episode of ratcheting.<sup>138</sup> When tensions are highest, even common military-to-military interactions such as intercepting and tailing aircraft/naval vessels or monitoring patrols

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<sup>136</sup> (Arreguin-Toft 2001)

<sup>137</sup> (King and Waddington 2005, 258-259)

<sup>138</sup> Skirmishes can include limited kinetic interaction (such as minor positional engagements along a line of control (LoC), physical encounters between opposing units (such as the 2020-2021 melees between Indian and Chinese forces in the disputed border region) as well as aggressive encounters designed to intimidate others as will be seen in the case study on the South China Sea where PLAN/maritime militia ships engage with opposing naval and fishing ships.

can spiral out of control leading to prolonged skirmishes and possibly open conflict. Skirmishes are particularly dangerous in regard to flashpoint ignition due to their spontaneous nature; as opposed to a strategic initiative pursuing decisive kinetic conflict from state-level officials, skirmishes often begin due to a deadly mix of misunderstanding and bravado. Lower-level commanders in the immediate theater are the lynch pin for both escalation and de-escalation as encounters which prompt skirmishes often occur with little warning or leeway for consultation with higher authorities. The adage “cooler heads prevail” is paramount, however individual commanders can be positioned in disputed areas precisely for their confrontational nature, a strategic gamble that a foe would not be willing to risk escalation in the face of aggression. In such a scenario of ‘cowboy diplomacy’, should two confrontational commanders meet in a disputed area their mutually provocative actions can prove to be the spark which ignites the flashpoint. Kinetic action in flashpoints of high volatility, such as skirmishes between military forces or a limited strike,<sup>139</sup> can act as a harbinger imminent flashpoint ignition should these increase in frequency and scope.<sup>140</sup>

Skirmishes can occur in both low volatility and high volatility flashpoints; in the former they are rare occurrences indicative of unexpected ratcheting which can be settled through de-escalatory measures, in the latter, where they are more common, the capacity for two actors to meet and collectively lower tensions has diminished.<sup>141</sup> Whereas in a low volatility flashpoint this meeting

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<sup>139</sup> Examples of limited strikes can be seen in Israeli air strikes into Lebanon, Syria, and occasionally Iran to disable/destroy what are perceived to be imminent threats to security or targets of opportunity (such as a high-ranking militant leader, etc.)

<sup>140</sup> This is particularly salient in situations of ‘tit-for-tat’ strikes.

<sup>141</sup> For example: While the Kargil War (1999) led to a general cooling of the flashpoint through the de-securitization of mutual points of contention in the Lahore Declaration, the melee skirmishes (2021-22) between India and China in their disputed Himalayan region, though temporarily cooling the flashpoint via backroom diplomacy, ultimately led to an increased securitization of the issue between the actors.

could lead to a general cooling in the of a flashpoint, in high volatility situations the aversion to ‘blinking first’ can perpetuate and escalate tensions. Here, public opinion, in addition to security concerns, is a principal factor in decision making at the strategic level. As the increased internal nationalist rhetoric of an actor involved in a flashpoint moves down the spectrum of volatility, stepping back from the precipice of kinetic conflict can pose a risk of losing face with its citizenry. Similarly, public opinion can push leadership into taking more aggressive security posturing in a theater which increases the likelihood of ratcheting events and flashpoint ignition.<sup>142</sup>

High volatility flashpoints might reappear immediately following a kinetic conflict should the underlying securitized issues which led to the flashpoint’s ignition remain unresolved, as was seen following the first (1988-1994) and second (2020) Nagorno-Karabakh Wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Here the underlying issue, sovereignty over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, remained unsettled and despite gains by Armenia in the 1990s and Azerbaijan recapturing significant territories in the 2020 war, a negotiated settlement remained untenable due to large areas of Nagorno-Karabakh remaining contested as well as existential nationalist narratives in both countries which were resolute in avoiding compromise. As of writing, a decisive victory by Azerbaijan in a 2023 campaign forced the capitulation of the Armenian-backed Nagorno-Karabakh government and gave full control of the territory to Baku; however, the issue still remains securitized by both political communities, especially in Armenia, which indicates that the flashpoint, though temporarily smoldering due to Azerbaijan’s strategic victory, is likely to reappear in the coming years.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> (Doherty and Kiley 2023)

<sup>143</sup> (Associated Press 2023)



### *High volatility diplomacy*

As with economics and security surrounding flashpoints of high volatility, diplomatic discourse and actions take an increasingly overt and provocative form as the flashpoint moves further down the spectrum of volatility. The rhetoric between actors reflects the securitized nature of the underlying issues which drive the flashpoint, with the willingness and capacity for dialogue between actors diminishing over time. Concurrently, favor and materiel seeking by actors towards regional and extra-regional actors intensifies in relation to the flashpoint's overall tensions and potential for ignition. During this intensification, the flashpoint moves towards the center of the international stage as both peacemakers and provocateurs work towards their mutually exclusive goals.

At the point of high volatility, it is increasingly difficult for actors in an RSC to avoid partiality. Taking a neutral stance can adversely affect relations with flashpoint actors who might view neutrality itself as provocative or unreliable from their existential perspective. For this reason, regional actors who during periods of low volatility might have been able to distance themselves from becoming involved in the flashpoint could be dragged into disputes as reluctant participants. As more actors within an RSC demonstrate their partiality towards one actor/bloc over another, the further tensions ratchet towards ignition. Additionally, these 'new' participants can widen the scope of the flashpoint beyond its original underlying issues as their own historic patterns of enmity with flashpoint actors comes into play.<sup>144</sup> This is in line with RSCT where "security interdependence is markedly more intense between the states inside [RSCTs] than between states inside the complex and those outside it."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, 45)

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid* p. 46

In regional forums, blocs can also begin to form between parties involved in the flashpoint and unaffiliated actors. Often this disunity and infighting lowers the overall capacity of the forum to act as a multilateral platform, both as a means of regional governance as well as an instrument to alleviate tensions and build trust between parties. In region specific forums which usually overlap with an RSC, such as ASEAN or the EAC, the issues surrounding a flashpoint can cause institutional stagnation as parties refuse to cooperate on non-flashpoint related matters, either due to intentionally tying flashpoint issues to unrelated matters (educational programs, economic coordination, etc.) or by refusing to participate in the forum all together which could prevent quorum.<sup>146</sup>

Flashpoint actors increase their courting of extra-regional actors to involve themselves in the dispute during the shift from low to high volatility. Unlike in flashpoints of low volatility, as the outcome of the underlying issues of a flashpoint become existential for the actors involved, the aversion to the involvement of extra-regional actors decreases as the potentially destabilizing effect of their presence becomes irrelevant in light of already volatile tensions. Some aversion can continue to exist however regarding the manner in which the extra-regional actor will involve themselves in the flashpoint's affairs; this is especially true regarding the involvement of great powers in a flashpoint where they are likely place their own grand strategy above those of regional actors regarding flashpoint resolution.

Extra-regional actors from this point on can be placed into two categories: those which have been present the region since a period of low volatility, and those which have only penetrated since the shift to high volatility. In the former, an extra-regional actor which has already given

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<sup>146</sup> (Mogato, Martina and Blanchard 2016) (Heng 2021)

partiality to an actor or bloc involved in the flashpoint will increase its economic and security support alongside its public diplomatic support as the flashpoint heats, likely in line with the wider grand strategy; as opposed to later penetration by an extra-regional actor, this increased support is deployed through existing frameworks which has a lower ratcheting effect on the flashpoint, though this is relative to the size of the increased support and existing tensions.

An extra-regional actor attempting to or having been courted by a flashpoint actor into penetrating into the region without a significant pre-existing presence constitutes a more severe ratcheting of a flashpoint. Their introduction into a flashpoint's affairs and the economic and security support they provide on the side of one actor, or a bloc of actors, destabilizes the perceived preexisting balance of power and diplomatic dynamics surrounding the flashpoint. This can be seen as threatening to other actors and increases the likelihood of kinetic conflict out of a perception of a growing imbalance, potentially prompting a preemptive strike before the new actor further establishes itself. These 'new' courted actors can also bring about instability in a flashpoint by drawing the attention of a larger section of the international community, who might involve themselves in the flashpoint's affairs as a matter of grand strategy in relation to the new courted actor, rather than an interest in the outcome or resolution of a flashpoint. Similar to a school yard fight, a flashpoint can ignite from the pressure of an audience which has little stake in the aftermath of kinetic conflict and whose insistent clamor can drown out any hopes for a resolving dialogue.

If an extra-regional actor has the capacity for extended power projection, and the outcome of affairs regarding a flashpoint are pivotal for its own grand strategy, it may deploy its own security assets to the theater. The size of this deployment is proportional to the level of interest the extra-regional actor has in either promoting deterrence or in altering the balance of power. In

the penetration of a peripheral flashpoint of high volatility these often employ weapon systems such as ‘anti-access/area denial’ (A2/AD) platforms, which in themselves can outclass the offensive capabilities of a peripheral military by making their outdated assets effectively trivial. In flashpoints where there is a mix of peripheral and core militaries (or core-like assets employed by peripheral militaries) a larger deployment of assets is necessary which could include offensive naval deployments, air power deployments beyond surveillance and intelligence gathering, and ground deployments of combat ready troops.

#### 4.5 Contemporary High Volatility Flashpoints

In addition to the South China Sea, which is described in detail in a subsequent chapter, the following are high volatility flashpoint in the contemporary world-system. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, rather it is intended to highlight flashpoints which are near ignition points on the spectrum of volatility. The states highlighted in blue are considered to be central actors to the flashpoint.

The Taiwan Strait- Since the retreat of nationalist forces to island of Taiwan and the subsequent end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the status of Taiwan’s sovereignty has been in dispute. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) claims that the island is a renegade province and is an inseparable part of the Chinese political entity.

Concurrently the Republic of China (ROC/Taiwan), a remnant of the former mainland nationalist republic, has a plurality of political positions regarding its relationship to the mainland including independent minded policies, a ‘one China policy’, and a small but vocal political minority which



maintains that the ROC is the legitimate government of all of China. In recent years tensions surrounding the status of Taiwan have risen and pushed the flashpoint further down the spectrum of volatility. In addition to frequent military provocations and saber rattling, the leadership of the PRC has stated that it will not shy away from ‘reigning in’ Taiwan with military force.<sup>147</sup> The island is backed by many Western nations, importantly the United States, the PRC’s primary geopolitical rival, which has pledged to support Taiwan’s self-determination without overtly supporting its *de jure* independence.<sup>148</sup> The island is also a key manufacturer of critical computing components used in industries the world over, a fact which Taiwan has used to its advantage in both courting allies and keeping the mainland at bay.

The Korean Peninsula- Technically still at war despite an armistice in 1953, the two Koreas, North and South, maintain a tense military readiness along their border at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Though South Korea maintains an overwhelming superiority in military and economic

sophistication, the proximity of Seoul to the border with the North (within artillery range) as well as the North’s development of nuclear weapons has given Pyongyang a minimum credible defense and importantly deterrence to the South. A number of violent provocations by the North over several decades such as the



attempted assassination of the president Park Chung-Hee in 1968, the bombing of Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987, the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan in 2010 bombardment of Yeonpyeong in

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<sup>147</sup> (The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2022)

<sup>148</sup> (Lawrence 2024)

2010, in addition to several others, has kept the flashpoint on the far end of the spectrum of volatility. South Korea meanwhile has kept a strong alliance with the US (which as of 2020 stationed nearly 30,000 soldiers in the South), both have orchestrated the effective economic and diplomatic isolation of the North and have conducted annual military exercise across South Korea. Of North Korea's few friends internationally, its economy and military are supported by China and Russia who view the North as a buffer to US influence expansion in East Asia.<sup>149</sup>

### Sino-Indian Border Dispute

Budding geopolitical rivals China and India are locked in a prolonged border dispute in a remote and largely unpopulated area of the Himalayan mountains; the dispute has its roots in colonial-era borders which due to the area's isolation were never settled. A month-long war in 1962 created a 'line of actual control' (LAC) and despite several attempts at bilateral resolutions for settlement since then no concrete solutions have been found. Most recently (2020-2021) renewed skirmishes along the LAC have pushed the flashpoint further down the spectrum of volatility despite state level overtures of trust building. As tensions between the two powers rise in other Asian geopolitical theaters, this particular flashpoint where the two rivals come into direct contact with one another heats in-step and fuels mutual antagonism.<sup>150</sup>



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<sup>149</sup> (Paik 2024) (Rozman 2019)

<sup>150</sup> (Banejee 2022) (Tellis 2020)

## **4.6 Conclusion**

No two flashpoints are identical, each has specific circumstances and casual chains which led to its inception. Yet, flashpoints do have identifiable characteristics which allow them to be separated into categories of high and low volatility which denote the intensity of interlinked affairs and the likelihood of ignition. In conjunction with the previous chapter which laid out a typology of flashpoints, the inclusion of these two indicators provides a further elucidation to unravel the complexity of geopolitical flashpoints.

The following two chapters are case studies employing both the typology of the previous chapter and the high-low volatility classification described in this chapter. The first describes the Arctic flashpoint, a flashpoint of low volatility with a rising prominence on the international stage due to climate change. Following this is a case study of the South China Sea, a high volatility flashpoint on the edge of the volatility spectrum near ignition and one of the most precarious geopolitical hot-spots in the contemporary world-system.

## **5 The Arctic: A Low Volatility Flashpoint**

For the corpus of human history, the Arctic has been an afterthought: too remote and too environmentally hostile for any large-scale settlement aside from the small and scattered groupings of indigenous peoples who have inhabited the region for millennia, and too cost prohibitive for any economic activity more complex than the harvesting of living resources such as fish, whale, and pinnipeds. This began to change however in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as the High North became a strategic arena of the Cold War which saw early warning radars grow in the featureless tundra, submarines play cat and mouse under meters of ice, and trajectories for apocalyptic missile barrages traced in the sky.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended, along with the Cold War, the Arctic appeared poised to fade back into geopolitical obscurity; the region was now host to a growing number of scientists studying a wide range of natural phenomena from aurora to zooplankton. One particular field of Arctic study began to garner attention as the 21<sup>st</sup> century began, which would insert itself into international narratives in growing earnest: global warming.<sup>151</sup> In this region of timeless consistency things were changing; the reach of the yearly ice packs was dramatically receding, permafrost was melting into swamp, temperatures were rising to summer and winter peaks with no precedence in living memory. By 2010 the true impact of what was now called climate change was becoming apparent along with an unfortunate reality that not only was the Arctic in a state of flux, but these changes were likely to be permanent, and even worse, these changes were creating a feedback loop which would compound into an uncontrollable cascade of environmental shift.

As the Arctic evolves from ice-lock into a region of seasonal extremes, opportunities have begun to take shape as ecological norms collapse. The mercantile dream of a northern trade route between European and Asian markets has come to fruition as the yearly shipping season along Arctic sea routes now extends from late July to early December.<sup>152</sup> Hydrocarbon and rare-earth deposits which were previously deemed economically unfit for extraction are now poised to supply resource-hungry economies for decades to come. Tourists from every corner of the globe come in growing numbers to catch a glimpse of the vanishing High North and support a budding hospitality industry which stems population drift from indigenous and remote communities.

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<sup>151</sup> 'Global warming' is a now antiquated term, but in the late 1990s and early 2000s (and indeed still in some less-than-informed contemporary media) the dynamics of global climate change (the now appropriate terminology) were still not completely understood, with the purported line of thinking being that the planet would succumb to a 'greenhouse effect' causing only a rise in global temperatures.

<sup>152</sup> (Aker Arctic 2023)



Overseeing the development of these opportunities are the eight Arctic states: Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), Russia, Canada, and the United States of America (via Alaska).<sup>153</sup> These states chair the Arctic Council, the preeminent multilateral organization concerning stewardship of the High North which, until the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2021, was championed as a model of cooperative international governance. The public dissolution of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ after the beginning of Russia’s war of aggression highlighted a growing trend of competition and distrust between the NATO aligned Arctic (NATO-bloc) and Russia which had quietly been building since the 2010s as climate change began to open the Arctic. This escalation in regional tensions has created a nascent low volatility flashpoint centered on the Arctic, encompassing the littoral area surrounding the Arctic Ocean populated by the Arctic Eight. This flashpoint exists within a liberal, rules-based political environment which while becoming more tense, has remained resilient to an escalation into high volatility relations and provocative unilateral action.

This chapter examines the Arctic as a case study for a low volatility flashpoint, highlighting the precarious balance between grandstanding, mitigation, and cooperation in the High North. First, a brief introduction into the recent geopolitical situation in the Arctic sets the stage by outlining the key events which led to the Arctic’s nascent flashpoint since the end of the Cold War. Next, an analysis of diplomatic, security, and economic factors which showcase the contemporary Arctic’s low volatility characteristics and perpetuate existing tensions are discussed. Beginning in the diplomatic realm, this chapter examines the end of Arctic exceptionalism, a belief that the High North could isolate itself from outside geopolitical concerns which has lasted for decades. This has culminated in the Arctic Council becoming an inert forum for dialogue and conflict

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<sup>153</sup> Commonly referred to collectively as the ‘Arctic Eight’

mitigation. Regarding security, the Arctic has become host to a budding defense-oriented arms race which has increased in its intensity since the mid-2010s and has become more enduring phenomena since the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. The analysis of this security factor will center on the refurbishment of Arctic military assets by regional actors as a form of status seeking, as well as the implications of an expanded NATO and Russia’s war in Ukraine on Arctic security dynamics. Economically, it examines how Arctic states maintain a tight hold on access to the emerging opportunities in the High North and aversion to outside actors developing dual-use investments in the region.

## 5.1 A Modern History of the Geopolitical Arctic: Pathway to Volatility



Figure 3 The Geopolitical Arctic<sup>154</sup>

<sup>154</sup> (Central Intelligence Agency, World Fact Book 2020)

## *From the Cold War to February 2022*

The Arctic's flashpoint is a recent phenomenon with no historical precedence in the region's history, and at the time of writing it can be considered one of the newest foci of geopolitical tensions in the world-system. Even during the Cold War, when the Arctic was heavily militarized by NATO and the Soviet Union, the region itself was not a cause for discord between the blocs; rather the Arctic could more aptly be described as a sideshow, albeit one which involved ICBMs. The High North offered no pressing *casus belli* for either Moscow or Washington; there were no decolonizing peoples to influence, no resources at stake which were not already well within recognized boundaries, nor any strategic features which needed to be kept out of enemy hands. In light of the very 'hot' theaters of the Cold War in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Angola, the Arctic was a comparatively peaceful place.

On December 26, 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and along with it the Cold War. In its place rose the Russian Federation which had much greater concerns than perpetuating a global rivalry, chief of which was rebuilding a functioning economic system which involved significant cuts to the defense budget, including its Arctic presence.<sup>155</sup> Likewise, NATO de-escalated from the region, with ongoing wars in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans there were higher priorities than the Arctic which was now increasingly being seen as a "zone of peace" and "a territory of dialogue".<sup>156</sup> Both Russia and the Arctic NATO members maintained military assets in the region, but as time passed these atrophied into shells of their Cold War peaks a decade prior.

In 1996 the Arctic Eight came together to sign the Ottawa Declaration establishing a new multilateral organization for the purpose of collective Arctic stewardship: the Arctic Council.

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<sup>155</sup> (Rumer, Sokolsky and Stronski 2021)

<sup>156</sup> (Mikkola 2019)

Specifically avoiding issues of security per the declaration, the Arctic Council would instead promote socio-economic and scientific causes in the Arctic through cooperation, dialogue, and consensus.<sup>157</sup> This regional forum exceeded the expectations of the global community, including the Arctic states themselves, giving rise to the lauded term “Arctic exceptionalism” to denote the success of the forum in its multilateral stewardship of the region.<sup>158</sup> The Council’s chairmanship rotated every two years among the member states, giving each an opportunity to address issues important to their own regional agenda and uphold the Council’s ideology that no one state should dictate the future of the Arctic. Though the Arctic Council is not the exclusive intergovernmental body of the High North, it is certainly the most impactful and is the only body which includes all eight Arctic states.<sup>159</sup> Other notable organizations for the High North include: the Barents Euro-Atlantic Council (focusing on regional trust building and sustainable development)<sup>160</sup>, the Council of the Baltic States (focusing on trust building)<sup>161</sup>, and the Northern

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<sup>157</sup> (Arctic Council 1996)

<sup>158</sup> (Young 2019)

<sup>159</sup> (Andreeva 2023, 113)

<sup>160</sup> (Leclerc 2024, 4)

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

Dimension (EU and Russian relations “especially in North-West Russia and the Baltic Sea region”).<sup>162</sup>

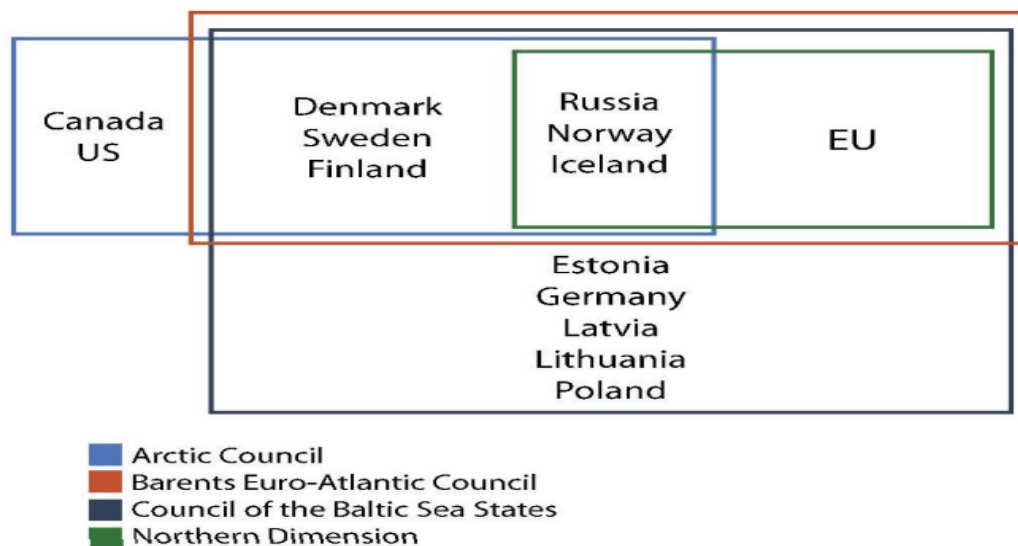


Figure 4 Interlinking Arctic Multilateral Forums Young (2019)

While the Arctic Council would maintain the primacy of Arctic states regarding the region’s stewardship, it did not entirely exclude non-Arctic states from participating in the forum. Labeled ‘observers’, starting in 1998 states, non-governmental organizations, and inter-governmental organizations could apply to have a delegation “observe the work of the Arctic Council” and “make relevant contributions through their engagement in the Arctic Council primarily at the level of Working Groups.”<sup>163</sup> Their rights and limitations as observers were laid out in the 2013 *Observer Manual for Subsidiary Bodies*, a succinct text which gives guidelines to observers regarding conduct, seating, projects, and proper protocol within the forum; the manual’s tone and content is clear: you do not have the rights of a council member.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>162</sup> (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2009, 2)

<sup>163</sup> (Arctic Council 2013, 7)

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

Of the 13 states which have received observer status, none is more consequential, nor was more contested, than China.<sup>165</sup> Many Council member states opposed granting China observer status, including its closest geopolitical partner, Russia. They cited Beijing's poor environmental stewardship elsewhere, irresponsible global development policies, and their history of human rights abuses.<sup>166</sup> Ultimately, China's application was approved in 2013 along with Italy, Japan, India, South Korea, and Singapore. Its successful bid was a significant step forward for their Arctic ambitions, as it legitimized, at least to some degree, the validity of a growing internal belief that China was an Arctic power with an inherent claim to participation in the region's governance.<sup>167</sup> China clarified its Arctic policy in a white paper released in January 2018 outlining its official position on several Arctic issues and emphasizing its own legitimacy in Arctic affairs as a 'near-Arctic state', including references to its status as a signatory to the 1925 Spitsbergen Treaty.<sup>168</sup> A key take-away from the white paper is China's desire for a more internationalized Arctic, which would have non-Arctic states take on a larger role in the region's governance and affairs, though throughout the paper China reiterates that littoral states do have sovereign rights over the region in line with those laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which non-Arctic states are obliged to respect. However, this respect is intended to be reciprocal, with Arctic states allowing extra-regional actors the freedom

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<sup>165</sup> As of 2024 the 13 observer states are: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom

<sup>166</sup> (Lajeunesse 2018, 2, 4)

<sup>167</sup> (Lavengood, China and the 21st Century Arctic: Opportunities and Limitations 2022, 91)

<sup>168</sup> In 1925, amidst the post-World War One treaty frenzy, the Republic of China signed the Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty at the invitation of France to recover influence it was losing in China to the United States. Elated to be treated as an equal among Western powers, the ROC government quickly ratified the treaty. However, this should not necessarily be taken as a sincere Chinese interest in the Arctic at the time, as Nengye Liu (2019) writes, the ROC had no real interest in Arctic affairs at the time of signing the treaty and was possibly not even aware of the discussions and issues surrounding the archipelago: "*As a weak nation who was struggling with its survival from domestic chaos and foreign invasions, China had no capacity to exercise its rights and pursue its interests in a remote part of the world like the Svalbard archipelago. The Treaty was forgotten, as if it never existed, for more than 65 years.*"

to conduct activities in the region so long as they are in accordance with the law and in the interests of the international community.<sup>169</sup> The expansion of observer states to the Arctic Council in 2013 can be viewed as the pinnacle of the High North's open-yet-reserved culture, the following year would see the beginning of a series of geopolitical events which would slowly tarnish the cooperative nature of the region and set the scene for the inception of a low volatility flashpoint.

After the High North had successfully maintained its exceptionalism for nearly 18 years since its creation in 1996, tactfully insulating itself from geopolitical developments elsewhere and maintaining a cooperative, almost apolitical culture, things began to quickly change. In 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea strained relations between Moscow and Arctic NATO members, prompting many in the former, as well as the wider geopolitical bloc aligned with them, to impose constraining sanctions on Russia which were designed to weaken its economic base and its ability to wage war through a restriction of critical technologies and access to their markets.<sup>170</sup> The Arctic Council at this time was chaired by Canada, who proposed suspending the Council's work until further notice; though this was dismissed by other member states and the Council continued its work, the seeds of mistrust had been sewn and the façade of Arctic exceptionalism began to tarnish. The Council would continue to function normally, if not with a high measure of circumspection, for the next eight years and negotiated several important agreements on scientific cooperation, polar shipping, and a fishing moratorium.<sup>171</sup> During this period a quiet re-militarization began in the High North, seeing NATO military exercises, increasingly involving (at the time) non-NATO members Sweden and Finland, growing in both sophistication and

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<sup>169</sup> (Lavengood, China and the 21st Century Arctic: Opportunities and Limitations 2022, 92) (Grieger 2018)

<sup>170</sup> (European Council 2024), also see: US Executive Orders 13660 & 13661

<sup>171</sup> (Kivurova 2022)

frequency, and Russia investing heavily into refurbishing Arctic bases mothballed since the early 1990s. While the idea of the Arctic as a ‘zone of peace’ would continue to persist, though amidst a growing chorus of academic and political doubters, few could ignore heating relations which seemed poised to melt Arctic exceptionalism.

### *After February 2022: The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Arctic*

The final nail in the coffin of Arctic Exceptionalism would come on February 24, 2022, with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>172</sup> Amidst the cascade of condemnations, international sanctions, and other forms of outcry which sprang from Moscow’s reckless military adventurism, the members of the Arctic Council, excluding Russia, met on March 3<sup>rd</sup> and “paused” the Council’s work in response to the invasion and stated they would continue the work of the Council collectively outside of the forum.<sup>173</sup> Environmental stewardship, economic initiatives, scientific cooperation, and other agreements previously negotiated by the Council would continue between the seven with only the Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue agreement remaining in force with all eight members.<sup>174</sup> Russia, who ironically was the rotating chair of the Council at the time, appeared to be undeterred by these developments and continued cultural and economic events under the council’s banner as if the seven empty chairs in the room had always been that way. The week before the seven met to announce their “pause”, Russia had amended its Arctic policy to place a greater emphasis on its own national interests as well as removed specific

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<sup>172</sup> Neither Moscow nor Kiev has made a formal declaration of war despite the intensity and duration of fighting between the two. The ongoing kinetic situation between Russia and Ukraine (beginning in 2016 and accelerating after 2022) has been described as a war, conflict, invasion, “special military operation”, and several other overlapping, yet distinct terms in policy, media, and academic spheres. In this work ‘war’ denotes extended kinetic engagement between actors while ‘conflict’ implies a more limited confrontation (which could expand into war), though in contemporary parlance (both in academia and in policy spheres) the terms are often used interchangeably. (Rothkopf 2016)

<sup>173</sup> (Schreiber 2022)

<sup>174</sup> (Winkel 2023)



mentions of cooperation with the Arctic Council.<sup>175</sup> In June 2022 the NATO-bloc began a limited resumption of their work on the Council (working groups, scientific programs, etc.) however excluded Russia from any further collaboration.<sup>176</sup>

Russia continued its chairmanship through its full term, accomplishing little due to the forum's consensus-based decision making, before handing leadership to Norway during a muted ceremony in May 2023. In an interview around the time of the ceremony, renowned Arctic scholar Whitney Lackenbauer cites the February 2022 invasion as the end of Arctic exceptionalism: "*Any dream of full-on Arctic exceptionalism... was over.*" going on to say "*In essence, what we're now seeing is that the Arctic, as a circumpolar region, is not isolated from geopolitics.*"<sup>177</sup> Reinforcing this point, as well as demonstrating the wider impact the Russian-Ukrainian War has had on pan-European diplomacy, was Russia's announcement that it would be withdrawing from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council due to "*... the fault of the Western members (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, the EU), the Council's activities have been effectively paralysed since March 2022. The Finnish presidency failed to confirm the transfer of the BEAC presidency to Russia, scheduled for October 2023, in violation of the principle of rotation thus disrupting the necessary preparations.*"<sup>178</sup> This was in response to cooperation in the forum being suspended by the 'Western members' due to the outbreak of the full-scale invasion in 2022.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> (Humpert, Russia Amends Arctic Policy Prioritizing 'National Interest' and Removing Cooperation Within Arctic Council 2023)

<sup>176</sup> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Sweden 2022)

<sup>177</sup> (Last 2023)

<sup>178</sup> (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023)

<sup>179</sup> (Edvardsen, Russia withdraws from the Barents Cooperation 2023)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine also had a remarkable, and certainly unintended, effect on the security environment of the Arctic in that it was the ultimate driving factor for the Arctic, non-NATO states of Finland and Sweden to petition to join the collective security organization. Particularly for the latter, which had maintained neutrality since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this was an unprecedented turn in Arctic security environment. Though the two had maintained strong links with NATO, including participating in numerous military exercises such as 2018's Trident Juncture, formally they remained outside of the alliance system. However in light of Russia's willingness to use force to attain its political goals, both Helsinki and Stockholm opted to submit simultaneous applications on May 18, 2022 with the goal of joint accession.<sup>180</sup> This has put almost the entirety of the Baltic Sea, save for the maritime areas in Russia's Northwestern Federal District<sup>181</sup>, within the territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of NATO member states as well as added an additional 1300 kilometers to the Russia-NATO border which now extends along the Finnish-Russian border; this latter border being a key strategic threat for the "crux of Russia's military establishment in the western Arctic" on the Kola Peninsula at Murmansk.<sup>182</sup> Russia's public response to this expansion of NATO on its doorstep has been comparatively muted with more pressing concerns in Ukraine, though in a statement on the matter, Vladimir Putin vaguely warned that "the expansion of military infrastructure into this territory would certainly provoke our response."<sup>183</sup> His deputies however have been more overt, such as former president Dmitry Medvedev stating that that the "There can be no more talk of any nuclear-free status for the Baltic – the balance must be restored," adding that in addition to

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<sup>180</sup> (Lehto 2023) Finland was accepted into NATO as of April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, with Sweden joining the alliance on March 7, 2024, after months of inter-NATO diplomatic wrangling prompted first by Turkey, and then later by Hungary.

<sup>181</sup> This includes Kaliningrad and the Baltic-facing Leningrad Oblast

<sup>182</sup> (Bermudez, Conley and Melino 2023)

<sup>183</sup> (Faulconbridge, Putin sees no threat from NATO expansion, warns against military build-up 2022)

the potential deployment of nuclear weapons to the Baltic, that Finland and Sweden would have hypersonic missiles “close to home”.<sup>184</sup>

### *Going Forward: The Arctic’s Nascent Flashpoint*

Despite 30 years of progress distancing the Arctic from security issues and geopolitics further south, the region has become host to a nascent flashpoint for the first time in its history. Unlike during the Cold War where the region acted primarily as a theater for early-warning systems and missile defenses, the High North itself has become a focal point of tensions as Arctic exceptionalism gives way to mistrust and competition.

As was mentioned in chapter 3, flashpoints exist on a spectrum of volatility which indicates the likelihood of flashpoint ignition and the outbreak of kinetic conflict between the parties involved. The Arctic’s flashpoint is on the low volatility end of this spectrum and while far from being inert, does not immediately pose a risk of ignition as will be detailed below. However, with the collapse of Arctic exceptionalism in 2022 it is not outside of the realm of possibility that events further south will now creep into the High North.

## **5.2 Drivers of the Arctic Flashpoint**

The flashpoint in the Arctic is one of the most recent to develop in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the first in the region’s history. The following sections offer examples of territorial, political, and socio-economic disputes which drive the Arctic flashpoint. As will be shown, these disputes intertwine to create low volatility, yet increasing, tensions. In comparison to a flashpoint of high volatility, as will be demonstrated in the South China Sea case study, there are fewer disputes between

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<sup>184</sup> (Faulconbridge, Russia warns of nuclear, hypersonic deployment if Sweden and Finland join NATO 2022)

actors which sustain the flashpoint; specifically concerning the Arctic, these issues have coalesced between Russia and the Arctic NATO bloc.

Type of Dispute	Drivers	Key issues
Territorial	Contemporary security concerns	Security dilemma between Russia and NATO
Political	International orders of power	Russia’s ostracization from the Arctic council after 2023 invasion of Ukraine leading to an inert forum
Socio-economic	Economic stability/security	Russian threat perceptions to regional resource extraction and Northern Sea Route

Table 3 Drivers of the Arctic Flashpoint

### Political

#### *An Inert Arctic Forum*

After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 regional diplomacy has decreased considerably from its high-water marks ten years prior. In addition to NATO-bloc Arctic states suspending their participation in the Arctic Council during the Russian presidency, a number of related activities in the High North have also been affected. These include both track I and track II activities<sup>185</sup>, severely impacting regional diplomacy and development. The suspension of track II activities is particularly damaging to regional diplomacy; they not only serve their stated mission (ex. regional economic development, cultural collaboration, etc.) but often act as important backchannels between governments for dialogue and trust building which for reasons of ‘face’ cannot be discussed at track I gatherings.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Track I- government-to-government activities; Track II- academics, NGOs, scientific cooperation, etc. For example concerning Track I, the 2023 Arctic Science Ministerial meeting was only attended by Russia, who was hosting the event in St. Petersburg; as well on Sep 03, 2022, the European Union, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden released a joint statement suspending joint activities with Russia “In light of Russia’s blatant violation of international law, breach of rules-based multilateralism and the principles and objectives of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council” (European Union External Action Service 2022) (Canova and Pic 2023)

<sup>186</sup> (Obern 2018)

With the Russian government adjusting its official Arctic policy to remove mentions of multilateralism, such as the Arctic Council, and instead stress unilateral approaches to the region, it signals to other Arctic states that diplomatic efforts on regional issues will bear little fruit.<sup>187</sup> Likewise however, the NATO-bloc has quickly developed a culture of exclusion regarding Russia (in other regions as well as in the Arctic), tying all diplomacy to the issue of Ukraine, a non-starter for Moscow; this regresses regional diplomatic tensions to Cold War-era dynamics of assumption, suspicion, and zero-sum thinking. While the present flashpoint in the Arctic remains low volatility in nature, the absence of functioning diplomatic activities increases the chance of ratcheting events, especially regarding security, which could move the flashpoint up the volatility spectrum.<sup>188</sup> As well, in cases where dialogue between actors is limited or non-existent for extended periods, this creates a pattern of enmity which haunts future diplomacy and lowers its efficacy.<sup>189</sup>

The question of an alternative to the Arctic Council has been risen, a new organization which would be able to continue some of the necessary work of keeping the non-diplomatic/political Arctic running smoothly.<sup>190</sup> In a Washington Post interview, noted Arctic scholar and associate professor at the University of Tromsø Marc Lanteigne stated:

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<sup>187</sup> For example: the original policy from March 2020 calls for “the strengthening of good neighborly relations with the Arctic states” in the fields of economic, scientific, cultural and cross-border cooperation” the amended version now calls for the “development of relations with foreign states on a bilateral basis, [...] taking into account the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic.” (Humpert 2023)

<sup>188</sup> (Jönsson and Aggestam 2009, 38)

<sup>189</sup> An example of this can be seen in diplomatic efforts between Western states/South Korea and North Korea, where when the rare opportunity for track I occurs, these events rarely garner sufficient momentum for impactful dialogue which can create trust between the parties involved.

<sup>190</sup> (Edvardsen, USA’s Arctic Coordinator: “We Do Not Want to Change the Structure or Membership of the Arctic Council” 2023)

*If we are dealing with a long-term freeze — for lack of a better word — we might need another forum to discuss climate change and the ships paddling around the Arctic.<sup>191</sup>*

While shipping and climate science might seem inconsequential, they are in fact cornerstones of Arctic diplomacy. As Arctic shipping increases in-step with climate change, widening shipping seasons in the High North and multiplying the risk of accidents, creating an imperative for coordinated search and rescue (SAR) networks and inter-governmental training for responding to oil spills and ecological disasters.<sup>192</sup> SAR and disaster response by their nature have extensive military components and promote military-to-military communication which not only raises the efficacy of their coordination on these matters, but also acts as a trust building measure between security forces. This trust can serve to deescalate security tensions as well as deter cascade effects from misunderstandings during instances of military contact.<sup>193</sup> As was mentioned previously, the Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue agreement remains one of the only multilateral links in the Arctic, and as the volatile environment surrounding the region's flashpoint progresses it is possible this too could fall by the wayside and leave few, if any, track I diplomatic avenues open in the High North.

Scientific collaboration, such as the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) and the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), as well has served as an important track II avenue for diplomacy in the Arctic and serves as one of the foundations of international cooperation in the region for both Arctic and non-Arctic states.<sup>194</sup> This cooperation, often with multi-national teams, is vital for understanding climate change in the High North, the fastest

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<sup>191</sup> (Rauhala 2023)

<sup>192</sup> (Thorsson 2023)

<sup>193</sup> (Cepinskyte and Paul 2021)

<sup>194</sup> (Zaika and Lagutina 2023)

warming region on Earth, as well as a number of other scientific pursuits. Despite its importance, it is among the hardest hit by the collapse of collaboration in the Arctic with Russian and NATO bloc scientists no longer able to meet, form projects, or even share data; in January 2024 the science community decried that the absence of Russian data, important due to the size of the Russian Arctic and its vast areas of melting permafrost, would lead to biased and inaccurate results which would impact downstream research.<sup>195</sup> A study led by Serafima Andreeva at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Norway which interviewed Russian Arctic researchers after March 2022 found that there were significant challenges faced in the community with “few windows open for researcher-to-researcher dialogue,” a worrying development, as they also find that the maintenance of researcher networks is an important factor in higher level diplomacy.<sup>196</sup> Yet, with the difficulty of separating individuals from institutions as Andreeva writes, there are obstacles to collaboration for the foreseeable future so long as the war in Ukraine continues. The importance of researcher networks cannot be understated. Often specialists, who go on to become heads of institutes, departments, etc. up to the ministerial level, maintain these diverse international networks over decades, forming personal bonds with collaborators which can serve as important back channels for diplomacy. However, the conclusion of the war in Ukraine could also be the catalyst for a brain drain in Russia, which would further weaken its collaborative capacity and therefore the human resources which drive this track II scientific diplomacy, an event which Andreeva draws comparisons to in living memory:

*The outflow of knowledge and brain drain after the Russian war on Ukraine also threatens to weaken the dimension of researcher networks, leading to challenges in Russian academia similar to those after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>197</sup>*

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<sup>195</sup> (Knudsen 2024)

<sup>196</sup> (Andreeva 2023)

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. p.125

Could a new, more limited Arctic forum as Marc Lanteigne posits cover these critical areas during this period of growing volatility and enmity in the High North? For the time being this is unlikely. While there might be agreement individually from states that the need for a continuity of Arctic multilateralism is an imperative, matters of international prestige and bloc-politics (which heavily rely on public sentiment) would not permit a new forum which could effectively separate High North from other global politics; this is true for both Russia and the NATO-bloc which have entrenched themselves in a separation from one another. Additionally, there is resistance from states in creating an alternative structure due to the diplomatic investments already made in the Arctic Council up until the 2022 war in Ukraine, and that new forums might create roadblocks to any future normalcy in the Arctic Council. In an interview with High North News on the subject, US Coordinator for the Arctic Region James P. DeHart of the US State Department rejected the need for an alternative forum entirely:

*Creating an alternative structure to the Arctic Council is not on our agenda. We believe the Council holds its greatest value as a circumpolar forum including all the eight Arctic states and binding together the people who live throughout the entire region.<sup>198</sup>*

When the war in Ukraine comes to its conclusion, whatever the outcome may be, it stands to be questioned if the Arctic Council will be able to retake its place as a mediating forum between Arctic actors and serve to deescalate the growing volatility in the High North. It is imperative however that some multilateral body exists to discuss regional affairs to avoid ratcheting the

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<sup>198</sup> (Edvardsen, USA's Arctic Coordinator: "We Do Not Want to Change the Structure or Membership of the Arctic Council" 2023)



flashpoint which exists, though this requires states to operate in good faith with one another, an atmosphere all too thin in warming geopolitical climates.

## Territorial

### *Frozen volatility*

The Arctic is an incredibly difficult environment for warfare: exposed skin freezes to frostbite in minutes, weapons and machinery jam in the polar temperatures, petroleum jellifies and batteries refuse to hold a charge, the featureless landscape offers no cover and the permafrost will not yield to build fortifications. Yet despite this, states have not been dissuaded from spending considerable time and resources creating specialized war fighting systems and training regimens to adapt to this environment. Even during the era of Arctic Exceptionalism, the specter of security could never be fully exorcised from the region. In 2010 Rob Huebert of the Canadian Defense & Foreign Affairs Institute discussed the “Newly Emerging Arctic Security Environment”, noting how despite over a decade (at the time) of growth in Arctic cooperation, concerns were growing about regional shifts in security thought:

*The Arctic states are seemingly contradicting the intent of their statements as evidenced by their current actions. All of the Arctic states have begun rebuilding their military forces and capabilities in order to operate in the region. Personnel are undertaking Arctic training exercises; submarines that can operate in ice are being developed or enhanced; icebreakers are being built; and so forth. The catalyst for the Arctic states' efforts appears to be a recognition that the Arctic is critically vital to their interests and they will take the steps necessary to defend these interests. The consequence of these efforts is that notwithstanding the public statements of peace and cooperation in the Arctic issued by the Arctic states, the strategic value of the Arctic is growing. As this value grows, each state will attach a greater value to their own national interests in the region. The Arctic states may be talking cooperation, but they are preparing for conflict.<sup>199</sup>*

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<sup>199</sup> (Huebert 2010, v)

Fourteen years later this build up has accelerated into a re-militarization of the region on-par with Cold War era posturing, however, as will be detailed below, this is still a low volatility environment despite the rancor and arms buildup.<sup>200</sup>

The security factor in the Arctic flashpoint is the most precarious and vulnerable to ratcheting due to the inherent catalytic nature of security dynamics. Diplomatic spats may be ironed out in track II meetings or gladhanding state visits, economic disputes can be arbitrated by the governing bodies of the liberal world-economy or appropriate de-escalation trade talks, security issues however are quick to be viewed through an existential, zero-sum lens and thus are more difficult to assuage between actors. In the High North, the normal pathways to security dialogue have been muted due to diplomatic fallout from Russia's war in Ukraine and a growing atmosphere of distrust between the Moscow and the NATO-bloc.

The Arctic military buildup is led by Russia who for more than a decade has dramatically increased its security footprint in the region.<sup>201</sup> The High North has been a primary security theater for Russia since the Soviet era's 'Bastion Defense' strategy of insulating the Russian northern coast and military assets (many of which are based around the Kola Peninsula) from possible NATO incursions.<sup>202</sup> After the conclusion of the Cold War and the devolution of the Soviet Union, the new Russian Federation decreased its military commitments to the region due to a combination of budgetary restrictions and a calmer geopolitical climate which largely removed the necessity of its (at the time) bloated Arctic security presence. Russia began a ratcheting securitization of its placing in the geopolitical pecking order in the 2010s and with its

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<sup>200</sup> (Boulègue 2022)

<sup>201</sup> (Kjellen 2022)

<sup>202</sup> (Hestvik 2020, 22)

coffers flush with the cash of Arctic hydrocarbons it began to revitalize its security footprint in the High North, increasing its assets both in quantitative and qualitative terms.<sup>203</sup> This includes refurbishing existing bases as well building new installations, moving more technologically A2/AD systems to the region, and recommitting troop formations to Arctic warfare expertise.<sup>204</sup>



Figure 5 Selection of Russian military and civilian infrastructure throughout the Arctic<sup>205</sup>

Jonas Kjellen of the Swedish Defense Research Agency notes that this re-militarization of the Russian Arctic is not evenly distributed across the region, and rather than a Cold War era focus on longitudinal axis posturing (ex. flight paths for nuclear weapons exchanges), its new strategic focus appears to be based on the latitudinal axis of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and a reinforcement of this polar sea route's entry/exit points.<sup>206</sup> This reflects the importance of the NSR in Russia's grand strategy, not only as a means to reinvigorate its economy on the world stage, but also as a redrawing of its Bastion Defense for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition to its

<sup>203</sup> (Kjellen 2022, 35)

<sup>204</sup> (Hestvik 2020, 2) (Melino, Conley and Bermudez Jr. 2020)

<sup>205</sup> (Kjellen 2022)

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

remilitarization of the Arctic, Russia has also shown that the region is also a theater for its hybrid warfare expertise, including cyber operations, sabotage, and border violations.<sup>207</sup> Importantly these hybrid acts also constitute ratcheting events, though as they themselves are in a ‘grey area’ outside of the traditional *casus belli* for kinetic conflict, targeted actors often have difficulty formulating responses which gives an advantage to the provocateur. In a February 2024 joint press conference of the Norwegian intelligence and police services, Chief of the Norwegian Intelligence Services Andreas Stensønes commented that this trend of hybrid warfare in the Arctic was likely to continue for the foreseeable future:

*The fact that Russia sees itself in a lasting conflict with the West indicates that they will attempt to affect our will and ability to protect our interests. And in Russian military doctrine, civilian targets are also legitimate; as political leadership, socially critical infrastructure, and targets of major economic value. The targets can be affected by various measures under the level of military conflict.*<sup>208</sup>

In turn, NATO-bloc militaries have also increased their regional defense spending and dedicated more strategic focus to the region, though this is not evenly spread among the bloc. Heading this are the Nordic NATO members Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, who have steadily coordinated national and regional defense in response to Russian re-militarization efforts as well as recently in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine.<sup>209</sup> The recent military spending and acquisitions of Norway offer a paradigmatic example of other Nordic state’s defense developments. Per the 2022 *Future acquisitions for the Norwegian Defense Sector 2022-2029*

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<sup>207</sup> A recent development in Russian hybrid strategy has been to funnel migrants from the global south towards the borders with NATO countries in what the Finnish government calls “instrumentalized migration” which poses a “serious threat to Finland’s national security and public order.” This has prompted Finland to close their border with Russia on numerous occasions and acts as a ratcheting event in both the security and diplomatic domains. (Tanner 2024)

<sup>208</sup> (Bye and Martinussen 2024)

<sup>209</sup> Nordic state Iceland does not maintain a standing army, the only NATO member to do so.

published by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Defense, eight prioritized technological areas for its national defense industry for this time period are outlined: (1) Command and control systems, information, decision support and combat systems (2) Systems integration (3) Autonomous systems and artificial intelligence (4) Missile technology (5) Underwater technology (6) Ammunitions, propulsion technologies and explosives (6) Material technology developed for military use (8) Life cycle support for military land, air and sea systems.<sup>210</sup> This report also details acquisitions and systems upgrades by domain (land, maritime, air, cyber), of particular interest in these subsections is the shift in equipment acquisitions which would serve to specifically counter developments in Russian warfighting capabilities such as investments in man-portable air-defense systems (often referred to as MANPADS), maritime countermeasure capabilities (including autonomous counter measure systems), long-range air surveillance systems, A2/AD systems, and replacing existing surface-to-air missiles with munitions which have more dynamic range capabilities.<sup>211</sup>

Juxtaposed to the Nordic investments in their regional defense capabilities is the United States, the largest NATO-bloc member both in the Arctic as well as overall in the alliance system. Often referred to as a ‘reluctant Arctic state’, the United States has let its Arctic defense infrastructure atrophy since the end of the Cold War, particularly its maritime assets.<sup>212</sup> Most important of these assets are the US Coast Guard’s icebreakers, which despite their importance for domain security, the US has allowed their inventory to fall to just three: the Polar Star (launched in 1973), the Healy (launched in 1997), and the Mackinaw (launched in 2005). Of these, the Polar Star, the heaviest and most capable to operate in the Arctic, is entering the end of its useful service life

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<sup>210</sup> (Norwegian Ministry of Defense 2022, 4)

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. 10, 18-19, 27

<sup>212</sup> (O'Rourke, Comay, et al. 2021, 40)

and the most recently built, the Mackinaw (commissioned in 2006), is 55 meters shorter than the 123 meter Healy and is permanently stationed for icebreaking on the Great Lakes rather than on the open ocean<sup>213</sup>; the US has continuously delayed its acquisition program for new ice breakers, presently back to 2027, and now has a smaller fleet than China, a non-Arctic state.<sup>214</sup> The issue of ice breaker funding in the US government is indicative of the wider problem of securing funding for Arctic defense, along with many other public investments; it has become a political football kicked from congressional session to congressional session for now more than 20 years with no session wishing to be the one who has to sign-off on the substantial price tag.<sup>215</sup> Despite this gridlock regarding asset investment, the United States's Department of Defense has remained active in the region, working to coordinate and participate in Arctic defense exercises and war games as well as developing new Arctic doctrines at the branch and service-wide level, including the US Army's first revised Arctic doctrine in 50 years.<sup>216</sup> Viewed from an objective stance, the United States' smaller security footprint in the Arctic can be seen to have a mitigating effect on regional tensions; should, for example, the size of its Arctic presence grow considerably over a short period of time it would likely be viewed an existential security threat to Russia, which in turn would more heavily invest in its regional security in a tit-for-tat measure which would ratchet regional tensions over the long-term.

Despite the re-militarization of the Arctic, the security factors of the region's flashpoint remain in a state of low volatility, though the re-militarization has certainly ratcheted tensions to levels above the period of Arctic exceptionalism. This is primarily due to two considerations: the

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<sup>213</sup> (USCGC MACKINAW 2022)

<sup>214</sup> (Humpert, New US Icebreaker Delayed Until 2027, Russia Orders 6th and 7th Nuclear Icebreaker 2023) Discounting the Mackinaw which is permanently stationed on the Great Lakes

<sup>215</sup> (Timotija 2023) The production program is estimated to cost \$13.3 billion dollars.

<sup>216</sup> (Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate Staff 2024)

realities of Arctic warfare and Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. The first was alluded to in this sub-section's opening, that the Arctic is one of the most hostile environments for warfare on Earth; in this way, geography itself is a barrier to high volatility, though this certainly has limitations. Regardless of contemporary modernizations and a shifting climate this particular reality does not change, and is most succinctly described by former Canadian Chief of Defense Staff, General Walter Natynczyk, who said "if someone were to invade the Canadian Arctic, [the] first task would be to rescue them."<sup>217</sup> The Arctic theater can be said to be ideal for the swagger and status seeking indicative of low volatility flashpoints; the weapons systems and training necessary to operate in the harsh climate are technologically sophisticated and expensive, and for the moment, are at no real threat of being deployed in combat situations which would put these investments at risk. Additionally, due to the inherent difficulty of conducting offensive operations in the High North, the majority of Arctic weapons systems and security strategies are defensive and deterrent in nature; an unintended benefit of this for conflict avoidance is that it is much more difficult to rattle a shield than a saber.

Secondly, Russia's war in Ukraine has proved to be a significant drain on Moscow's Arctic military resources, both in terms of matériel as well as manpower. Though this is episodic, as Moscow will doubtlessly work to rebuild its capacity after the war, it presents an example of how the unfolding of global events can affect the volatility of flashpoints.<sup>218</sup> At the outset of the 2022 war Arctic units were among the best trained and best equipped in the Russian military and employed in the initial invasion of Ukraine, among these being the 80<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Brigade

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<sup>217</sup> (Regehr 2017, 1)

<sup>218</sup> A similar historic example can be found in the Kamikaze (lit. divine wind) Typhoons of 1274 & 1281 which destroyed the Mongol army's capacity to invade the Japanese islands, ultimately permitting Japan to remain independent of Khanic rule.

based in Alakurtti which was formed in 2014 and dubbed the “Arctic Brigade”.<sup>219</sup> The 80<sup>th</sup> however found itself fighting in the temperate breadbasket of southern Ukraine rather than in the taiga and tundra of the High North and suffered heavy losses in Kherson.<sup>220</sup> Other Arctic units have fared no better, the 200<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Brigade based at Pechenga has been effectively wiped out, with the 76th Guards Air Assault Division sharing a similar fate having fought in the opening days of the invasion, and the Special Underwater Forces unit 69068 which trains in reconnaissance and sabotage behind enemy lines also having been decimated; these losses are not limited to manpower, these units have also lost specialized fighting and transport systems, many of which were considered to be cutting edge for the Russian military.<sup>221</sup> These resources cannot easily be replaced. Sanctions have limited Russia’s ability to replenish its high-tech weaponry and the lost personnel can only be replaced after years of specialized training in Arctic warfare.<sup>222</sup> In itself this is a de-escalation, as Russia’s degraded Arctic fighting capabilities will deter it from aggressive action in the region for the foreseeable future, even in the event of a victory in Ukraine. For the sake of context, in a September 2023 interview with Reuters Norwegian Armed Forces Chief General Eirik Kristoffersen, said Russian forces stationed in the Arctic near Norway were “20% or less” of their pre-war numbers.<sup>223</sup> US Coordinator for the Arctic Region James P. DeHart of the US State Department commented on the perception of NATO-bloc states on the possibility of spillover from the war in Ukraine into the Arctic during

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<sup>219</sup> (Staalesen 2023)

<sup>220</sup> (Axe 2022)

<sup>221</sup> (Wall and Wegge 2023) (Nilsen 2022)

<sup>222</sup> This is in addition to the future manpower shortages the Russian military will face which will impact its ability to recruit, and importantly maintain, young soldiers to become Arctic warfare experts.

<sup>223</sup> (Reuters 2023)



the 2022 Arctic Frontiers conference, showing that while tensions remained in the High North, there was no present worry of conflict in the region:

*We see no immediate risk for the conflict spilling over from Ukraine to the Arctic. Thanks to the courage of the Ukrainian people, Putin has his hands full in Ukraine. In addition, Russian forces from the Kola Peninsula have been used in the war, and they have allegedly suffered major losses...So, as per now, we do not see any direct risk of spillover. However, we have been worried about Russian military activities for a long time now, long before this last invasion of Ukraine. In general, it is about lack of transparency and some irresponsible behavior from the Russian forces.<sup>224</sup>*

In closing, while re-militarization of the Arctic has certainly contributed to the inception of the region's flashpoint, in particular Russia's re-militarization, environmental and geographic realities in combination with the war in Ukraine draining Russia's Arctic military resources have kept security factors in a state of low volatility, if not tense.

### Socio-economic

#### *Access Privilege and Barriers*

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Arctic's economics had remained largely unchanged since the region was connected to the wider world-economy hundreds of years before. Its primary exports were living resources (fish, whale, furs, etc.) and metals from scattered mining operations, though the climate was far too harsh and geography far too remote for any large-scale developments; even with the increase in production from the introduction of mechanized mining, and modern trawling fleets the region could hardly be said to be a powerhouse of economics outside of isolated gold rushes. In 1930 the Arctic's first oil field was discovered in Chibyuskoye (Komi

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<sup>224</sup> (Edvardsen, USA's Arctic Coordinator: "We Do Not Want to Change the Structure or Membership of the Arctic Council" 2023)

Republic), beginning a shift in regional economics which by the end of the century would see hydrocarbons as the Arctic's largest and most profitable export.<sup>225</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup> century would bring equally profound shifts, stemming from the onset of climate change. Mineral deposits and hydrocarbon fields which had previously been deemed unviable due to the high cost of extraction were suddenly edging into hypothetical profitability, or at least worthy of feasibility studies and prospecting.<sup>226</sup> As well, mythical maritime passages along the Arctic Ocean which had been long-sought by explorers and traders were being freed from ice-lock during the spring and summer, allowing for the first time in human history a shipping season in the High North. The new century has also brought many outside powers into the Arctic, eager to involve themselves in this economic boon. Most consequential of these is China, who has placed the Arctic in their national strategy as the 'Polar Silk Road' and self-adhered the label 'near-Arctic state' to their national identity.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter discussing high and low volatility flashpoints, in low volatility flashpoints actors may still keep outside powers at an arms distance from developing agency in the flashpoint's affairs. Despite a growing number of diplomatic contentions in the Arctic, this is one point where, at least tacitly, the Arctic eight are still in unspoken agreement. In contrast to their passionate courting of states to rally behind their stance on Ukraine, the High North still maintains its culture of exclusivity in stewardship, even if the primary multilateral forum is inert; this is best demonstrated in the Arctic in the manner in which regional actors have curated access to the region. As with other aspects of the Arctic this is approached differently by the NATO-bloc and Russia, however both can be said to be applying an attitude of 'limited

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<sup>225</sup> (Borshchevskaia, et al. 2022)

<sup>226</sup> (O'Rourke, Comay, et al. 2021, 58)

economic liberalism' in this curation, which for this work is defined as theoretically open access of economic opportunities which is hemmed by geopolitical considerations.

Russia, for example has worked extensively to develop the NSR which hugs the Russian Arctic coast, providing a shorter sea route from East Asia to European markets during the High North's shipping season; the significance Russia places on the NSR is seen in the 2020 *Strategy for Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Provision of National Security for the Period up to 2035* which mentions developments for both the route and its related economic impact throughout the document.<sup>227</sup> In turn, Russia maintains strict regulations regarding use of the NSR (for example requiring Russian pilots, insurance requirements, fees, etc.) and vehemently opposes the notion that the sea route is an international passage, as some interpret through the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>228</sup>; Canada maintains a similar position for its Northwest Passage (NWP) through their northern archipelago, though it is a minor issue in comparison due to the NWP's lack of overall development and utility to the NSR.<sup>229</sup> This is not to allude to Russia wanting the route to be exclusive, rather it looks to maintain unbridled stewardship over what it sees as a critical facet of its 21<sup>st</sup> century economic growth.<sup>230</sup> Presently, the route is primarily used for destination shipping by Russian firms from resource production centers in Siberia to refineries (or other bulk goods such as grains) and full

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<sup>227</sup> Estimations for the Arctic shipping season differ according to the route (NSR, NWP, TPR) and vessel type (Polar Code category A, B, C) in question, for the NSR the US Navy in 2014 estimated that by 2030 the shipping season is projected to stretch from early August to late October for class C vessels (those with limited ice capabilities) (Chief of Naval Operation, US Navy 2014, 11), according to Aker Arctic, a leading Arctic shipbuilding company, estimates that the shipping season for class B vessels (those with moderate ice capabilities) will in 2023 extend from the end of July to early December (Aker Arctic 2023) (International Maritime Organization n.d.) (Office of the President of the Russian Federation 2020)

<sup>228</sup> Specifically, the point of contention is article 38 of UNCLOS which states: "Freedom of navigation and overflight solely for the purpose of continuous and expeditious transit of the strait between one part of the high seas or an exclusive economic zone and another part of the high seas or an exclusive economic zone."

<sup>229</sup> (O'Rourke, Comay, et al. 2021, 25) (Lavengood, The evolving arctic in the world-system 2021, 481)

<sup>230</sup> (Lavengood, The evolving arctic in the world-system 2021, 479-480)

transit cargo shipping done almost exclusively by Chinese firms; the NSR cannot be considered a potential instrument of ratcheting for the Arctic's flashpoint as access is not a geostrategic priority for any members of the NATO-bloc.<sup>231</sup> However, this issue is still at play in larger (especially from the United States) discussions and actions in regard to 'freedom of navigation' (FON), which often sees the US Navy conducting FON operations (FONOPs) in other contested or access-denied waters around the globe (such as in the South China Sea). Though to date no FONOPs have been conducted along the NSR due to significant operational risks regarding ice conditions and what is perceived to low cost-benefit.<sup>232</sup>

NATO-bloc members have also worked to maintain control of their Arctic domain, though generally are more open than Russia. This has developed an important caveat in the last decade however, that investments should not pose a strategic risk to the overall security dynamics of the Arctic, primarily meaning that non-bloc actors cannot develop dual-use projects. Elements of control and restriction have largely focused on China, reflecting wider Sino-West geopolitical dynamics, and has seen several Chinese projects halted at various stages of development. In 2018 for example, the state-funded Polar Research Institute of China made an offer to purchase or lease an airport in a remote area of Finnish Lapland with the venture aiming to create a landing area for Chinese scientific flights researching Arctic atmospheric phenomenon. The renovation of the airstrip itself would have come with a price tag of at least 40 million euros, in addition, the project would have constructed new airport buildings and a research laboratory, all financed by Chinese funds. However the project was viewed with suspicion by the Finnish military and political community, not only was the air strip close to a Finnish military base, but the Chinese

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<sup>231</sup> (O'Rourke, Comay, et al. 2021, 35, 55)

<sup>232</sup> (Todorov 2022)

delegation also included a military attaché.<sup>233</sup> The project was ultimately blocked by the Finnish Defense Ministry due to the risk that any constructed installations or activities could be used in intelligence gathering.<sup>234</sup> A similar deal fell apart in 2017 concerning Greenland, where an abandoned Danish naval base was sought after by Chinese mining company General Nice Group; here security concerns were more apparent that the strategic port could be used as a logistics hub for military purposes, as well as the risk it could pose to American interests at Thule base. In a Reuters interview, a source with direct knowledge on the matter commented “It should be obvious to everyone that Denmark cannot have two superpowers playing hide-and-seek in Greenland. I don't think the U.S. would find such a situation amusing either.”<sup>235</sup> The lack of success China has found in these dealings indicates that the NATO-bloc is concerned with the potential ratcheting that could take place should one of these projects develop, their refusal, justified or otherwise, has served to satiate these worries and removed prospective regional tensions.

Of the factors which contribute to the flashpoint in the Arctic, economics is the least likely to ratchet regional tensions. This is due to the resources and shipping routes in question lie within already defined borders and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) which are by-in-large agreed upon by Arctic states.<sup>236</sup> The Arctic states themselves are likely to work to mitigate potential ratcheting

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<sup>233</sup> (YLE 2021)

<sup>234</sup> (Lavengood, China and the 21st Century Arctic: Opportunities and Limitations 2022, 101)

<sup>235</sup> (Matzen 2017)

<sup>236</sup> There remains some disagreement regarding EEZs in the high polar region of the Arctic Ocean, primarily centering on where the continental shelves end, though as these are remote, they have no real impact on Arctic economics or diplomacy for the time being, though can become contentious. With the exception of the United States, all Arctic actors are signatories to UNCLOS and have worked within its framework to submit claims for shelf limits (see Olesen 2017). However, the issue has still been used for propaganda purposes: In 2007 a Russian MIR submersible reached the seabed at the North Pole and planted a small titanium Russian flag during the mission to collect soil and water samples. Though much touted at the time in Western media sources (and indeed some Russian sources) of Russia ‘claiming’ the North Pole, this was neither the intent of

by limiting the influence of outside states in their internal Arctic development in the near to mid-term future.

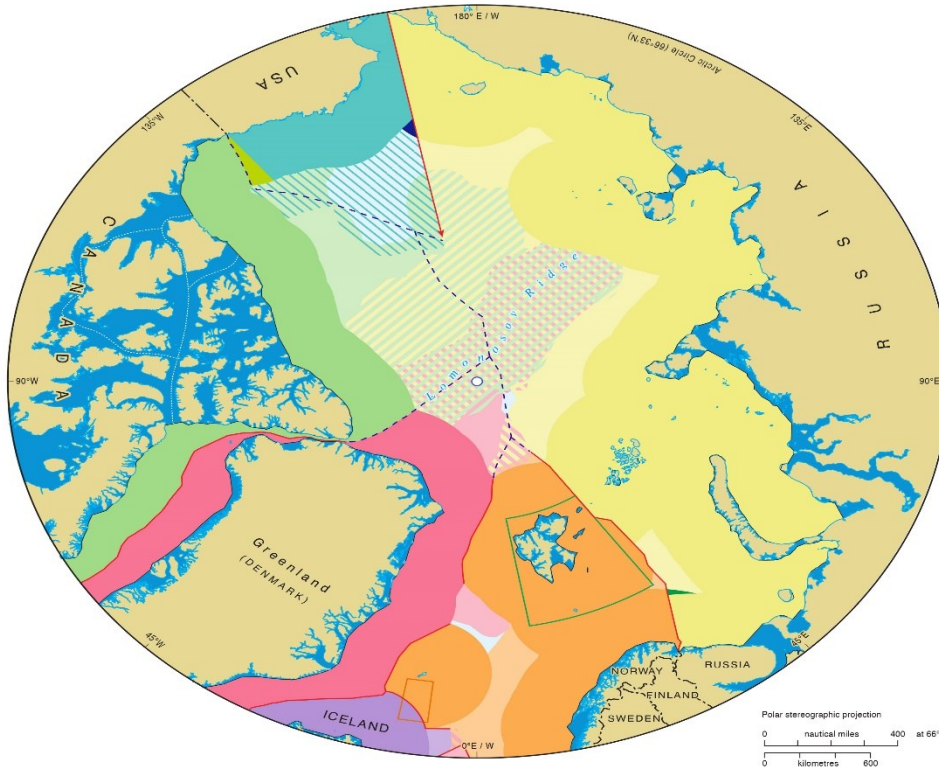


Figure 6 Marine jurisdiction and boundaries in the Arctic region<sup>237</sup>

### 5.3 Conclusion

The Arctic is host to a dynamic flashpoint, continuously evolving due to climate change and reverberations from geopolitical events elsewhere in the world-system. The actors involved in this flashpoint are leading states in global affairs and intertwined in the region’s political, economic, and security future. Despite a recent ratcheting of tensions surrounding the flashpoint

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the symbolic act nor does it act as a legal claim of discovery; if it were to have any measure of weight, then the United States would have equal claim to the Moon.

<sup>237</sup> (Durham University, Department of Geography, IBRU 2024)

due to remilitarization and the collapse of regional dialogues, the High North still remains in a state of low volatility. Two reasonings can be distilled from the above analysis for labeling.

The first is the trivial truth of Arctic physical geography; in defiance of the remarkable advances made in structural engineering, transportation technology, security domain awareness, and communication, the Arctic remains an exceedingly difficult environment to function in across all considered factors. Mindful of the RSCT axiom that threats travel better over short distances, and indeed the Arctic atop the Earth-sphere is an intimate theater, the harsh environmental realities artificially magnify the geopolitical distance that states must overcome to conduct business, diplomacy, and warfare. For this reason, the High North's is naturally predisposition to the grandstanding and protectionist mindsets indicative of low volatility flashpoints, as the risks associated with bellicose actions are unlikely to meet cost-benefit thresholds outside of extreme circumstances which would first require a significant ratcheting of the flashpoint.

The second reasoning which can be drawn is rooted in contemporary global affairs. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had two immediate effect on the flashpoint, one being a collapse of regional dialogue between the NATO-bloc and Russia which is epitomized by the stagnation of the Arctic Council, and while it served as a ratcheting event, it alone could not move the flashpoint down the spectrum to high volatility; additionally the continuity of limited communications, such as Arctic SAR, shows that relations are cold, but not frozen as they were before 1991. The other is the drain Russia's war has had on its Arctic security assets. Certainly, Russia maintains the most powerful military presence in the High North, however it has deployed many of its troop formations and regional weapons systems to the front lines in Ukraine only later to be decimated. These resources, both man and matériel, will take years, if not decades to replace and given the uncertain future of the Russian economy after the

conclusion of the war, even if Russia should emerge victorious, the monetary demand of specialized Arctic equipment and training will leave Russia in a defensive regional posture for the foreseeable future. Assuming that Russia is a rational actor, it will avoid regional maneuvers which would be perceived as bellicose, and actions which could ratchet tensions to levels of high volatility while it rebuilds its security presence in the High North to pre-2022 levels – on the condition that this is possible after the war’s conclusion. While the NATO bloc is unlikely to use this opportunity to strike Russia, or purposefully engage in maneuvers which would move the flashpoint to a state of high volatility, in a hypothetical scenario of similar circumstances, a bloc with historical enmities towards a single state, weakened by conflict, could see a window to achieve opportunistic goals while their rival is in a vulnerable state.

## **6 The South China Sea Flashpoint**

The ongoing dispute in the South China Sea (SCS) has escalated in recent decades from contentious rhetoric to a tangible, high volatility flashpoint involving both littoral states (Brunei, the People's Republic of China (China/PRC), Taiwan (ROC), Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) and extra-regional actors such as European states, Australia, Japan, and the United States. At the center of this dispute are competing claims over the maritime boundaries and ownership of various rocks, shoals, atolls, and lagoons which are spread across more than three million square kilometers and are crisscrossed by some of the world’s most important shipping routes. The dispute has been exacerbated by artificial islands created atop reefs by the PRC to reinforce its claims to the now infamous ‘ten-dash line’<sup>238</sup> and hallmark its solidifying hegemony

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<sup>238</sup> In September 2023, the PRC released a revised ‘standard map’ which, among other assertions in territorial disputes with neighbors, added an additional ‘dash’ to the decades old nine-dash line which demarcated its claims to the SCS. The new 10-dash line extends its claims to nearly encompass Taiwan’s eastern territorial waters though does not alter its claims to the SCS. (Lavengood, Examining the South China Sea dispute with general morphological analysis 2023)



over Southeast Asia. These islands host military assets which house fighter and bomber aircraft, anti-access/area denial installations (A2/AD), long-range radar systems, and thousands of soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>239</sup> Despite the PRC's claims to the region having been rejected in international arbitration proceedings they remain resolute in their assertion of sovereignty over most of the SCS and continue to fortify their position and increase their ability to project military power across the region.

The SCS's flashpoint is among the most precarious in the contemporary world-system; the myriad of issues which contributed to the flashpoint's inception have been heavily securitized by the actors involved to a point where diplomatic attempts to de-escalate from high volatility tensions have largely become inert. Grandstanding, zero-sum thinking, and realpolitik have become commonplace, with the idea of a collective equitable settlement amongst claimants failing to materialize, if not being outright rejected by maximalist assertions rooted in pseudo-historic narrative. This places the SCS's flashpoint on the far end of the volatility spectrum where a single ratcheting event can act as a catalyst to ignite the flashpoint and begin a period of kinetic conflict among claimants and their respective allies. Due to the geopolitical 'pull' this flashpoint has on extra-regional actors from across the world-system, the SCS's flashpoint holds the potential to develop into a high intensity, sustained conflict which would see a dramatic loss of life and potentially hobble and undermine decades of developmental growth in Southeast Asia.

This chapter examines the SCS as a case study for a high volatility flashpoint, highlighting the existential securitization, saber rattling, and brinkmanship which characterize the flashpoint. It begins with a brief history of the SCS dispute which outlines the geopolitical and historic

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<sup>239</sup> (Ford 2023) (CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2018) (RFA Staff 2022) (Huang 2022)

narratives which created the flashpoint, as well as its developments in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Next, follows an analysis of the primary territorial, political, and socio-economic drivers which sustain the high volatility in the region. First, the territorial drivers of the flashpoint are analyzed, focusing on the conflicting maritime claims to the SCS, the securitization of the first island chain by China, and the development of minimum credible defense by other claimants. Following this is an examination of the flashpoint's socio-economic drivers, concentrating on disputes over resource extraction rights and aggressive assertions of stewardship. Finally, the political drivers of the SCS's flashpoint are discussed, centering on littoral states' contention with China's growth as a world power and regional hegemon, and insights into the effects of deference and rejection on the flashpoint.

### **Naming Conventions**

As is common in areas of geopolitical tension, especially when concerning sovereignty over specific geographic areas, there are a plurality of naming conventions for the region labeled in this work as the South China Sea. Most are a matter of reference point: to the PRC and ROC it is Nán Hǎi (南海),<sup>240</sup> the South Sea, also the source of the English name South China Sea as well as most other non-regional languages (ex. Mar da China Meridional in Portuguese); to the Vietnamese it is Biển Đông, the East Sea; and to the Philippines it is the West Philippines sea. The label applied to the SCS by the Philippines in particular exemplifies how the wider SCS issue has accelerated in recent decades and demonstrates the constructed qualities around the dispute: this official designation came into existence only in 2012, after president Benigno Aquino III signed Administrative Order No. 29 *Naming the West Philippine Sea of the Republic of the*

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<sup>240</sup> Sometimes referred to in Chinese language texts as Nán Zhōngguó Hǎi (南中国海/南中國海) lit. South China Sea, though this is less common than Nán Hǎi

*Philippines, and for Other Purposes*<sup>241</sup>, and is often confused by Filipinos as to if this applies to the entire body of water or just the Philippine’s EEZ as was laid out in the administrative order – as is seen in the image below (figure 7), even ministerial bodies in the Philippine government have not escaped this ambiguity.<sup>242</sup>



Figure 7 Former Philippines Department of Agriculture Secretary William Dar in 2021 making a statement with an incorrect map of the 'West Philippine Sea'

## 6.1 A Modern History of the South China Sea’s Flashpoint

The SCS has been a focal point of Southeast and East Asian commerce for millennia and has grown in importance over time towards its status today as one of the world-system’s primary economic nodes; a key feature of which being the critical trade routes which ply its waters between manufactories and global markets. As a geopolitical theater, the SCS is generally delineated as the body of water stretching from Singapore and the Straits of Malacca in the South to the southern tip of Taiwan, hemmed by the Philippine Archipelago, the island of Borneo, and

<sup>241</sup> (Office of the President of the Philippines 2012)

<sup>242</sup> During interviews with Philippine sources for this chapter, the two labels were often used interchangeably with the broader South China Sea, both by interviewees in the government and in academia, with the former tending to prefer West Philippine Sea and latter using South China Sea more frequently.

the Eurasian mainland.<sup>243</sup> This area includes more than 200 small islands and maritime features (rocks, reefs, atolls, etc.) which lie at the heart of the dispute driving the flashpoint; many of these maritime features are not above sea level at low-tide, and those that are not are vulnerable to being swallowed by the rising seas due to climate change.<sup>244</sup>

Despite the narratives of claimants which often harken back several hundred years to establish their right to sovereignty over parts, or the entirety of the South China Sea, a more objective view of history shows that there has been no pattern of settlement or of historical control of any significance until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; this is not entirely surprising as the bulk of the small remote islands and maritime features have no sources of freshwater and little, if any, airable soil and cannot sustain human settlement without modern technologies.<sup>245</sup> As is pointed out by Bill Hayton, the remoteness of these features from the mainland made it difficult for the littoral states to reach them, much less claim and settle them; he describes that after the voyages of Ming era admiral Zheng He (~1405-1433 CE) and the subsequent destroying of his fleet at the behest of the Emperor, the Chinese navy did not possess another ship capable of reaching the islands until one was given to them by the United States in the 1930s.<sup>246</sup>

Pinpointing the date of the SCS's flashpoint's inception is a difficult task due to the number of overlapping narratives espoused by claimants. These can reach far back into historical records, often times containing significant bias, half-truths, and fictions to support the various claims of

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<sup>243</sup> For the specific geographic coordinates used by the International Hydrologic Organization (IHO) see *Limits of Oceans and Seas* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (1953) p. 30-31

<sup>244</sup> (Chen and Xu 2022)

<sup>245</sup> (Mirski 2015)

<sup>246</sup> (Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* 2014, 25-26) This is a specific reference to ships under the control of a Chinese political entity (Ming, Qing, First Republic), there were however fishermen from these entities who certainly visited the islands as did those of many other littoral entities which existed at the time.

littoral states. In an effort to avoid this brief history becoming mired in such controversy and to maintain a focus on the relevant matters to the contemporary flashpoint, it will instead focus on key ratcheting events since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which moved the flashpoint from low volatility to high volatility. One important event from before this timeframe which warrants inclusion is the Battle of the Paracel Islands on January 19, 1974, which saw the PRC gain de-facto control of the islands from South Vietnam before the latter's collapse; this was the last kinetic battle to occur in the SCS.

### *2009 Continental Shelf Submissions*

Unlike in the Arctic where the United States is conspicuously a non-party to UNCLOS, all of the states involved in the SCS maritime dispute are full parties to the agreement. On May 6, 2009, Malaysia and Vietnam jointly submitted to the 'Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf' their claims to territorial seas and EEZs running from the baseline per Article 76, paragraph 8 of UNCLOS with supporting documents which laid out the precise coordinates of their claims.<sup>247</sup> These claims were limited to the "southern part of the South China Sea" per their joint submission and were primarily concerned with defining the maritime borders between the two states rather than kicking a hornets' nest, going so far as to include the wording "[Malaysia & Vietnam] have undertaken efforts to secure the non-objection of other relevant coastal States."<sup>248</sup> There was however one coastal state which did object to the matter, though this state was nearly 1000km to the north of the area of the SCS in question: China.

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<sup>247</sup> (Malaysia/Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2009)

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. p. 2

One day later, on May 7<sup>th</sup>, the PRC's mission to the United Nations issued a *notes verbales* on the matter to the commission which, for the first time in an international document, used the 9-dash line as a historic justification for its claims to the lion's share of the SCS:

*China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map). The above position is consistently held by the Chinese Government and is widely known by the international community.*

*The continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles as contained in the Joint Submission by Malaysia and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has seriously infringed on China's sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea.*<sup>249</sup>

The map referenced in the *note verbales* (figure 8) depicts China's 9-dash claims to the SCS along with the transliteration of the Chinese names for the largest maritime features- all of which are well within the dashed line.

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<sup>249</sup> (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations 2009)

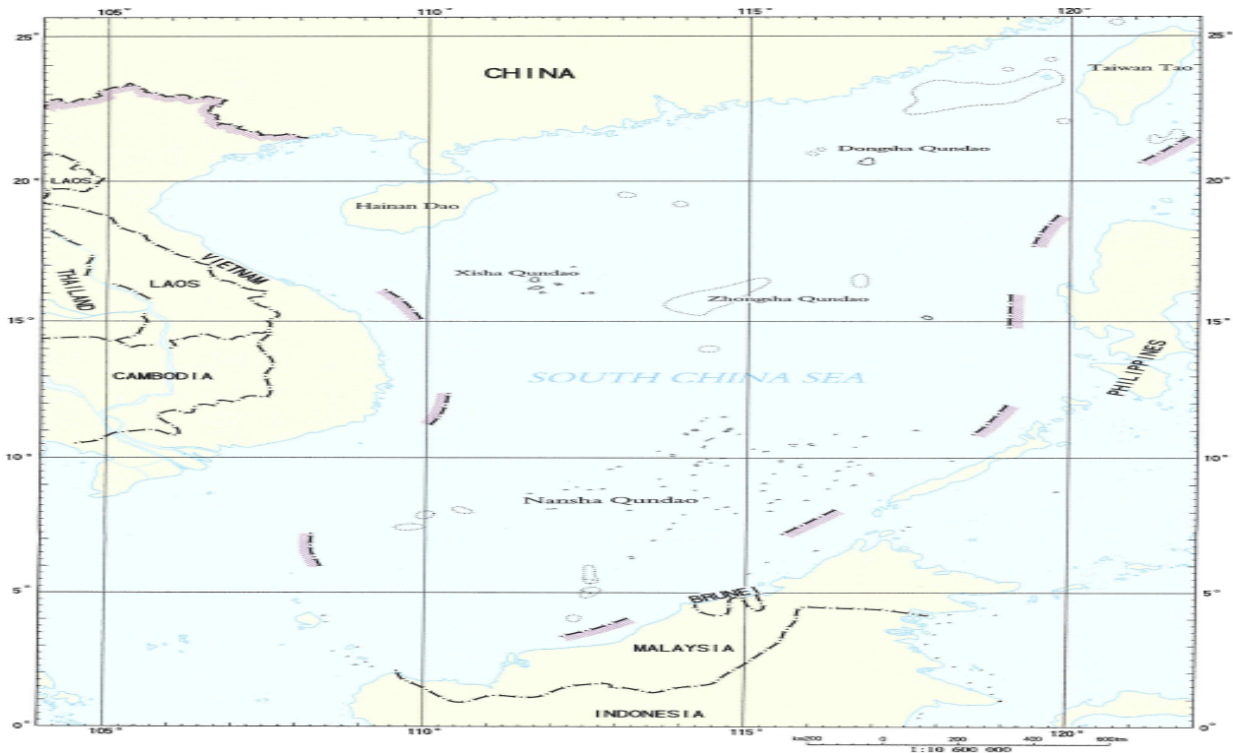


Figure 8 Map included with PRC note verbale

This was a considerable diplomatic ratcheting on the part of China. Not only were the extent of its claims to the SCS not “widely known by the international community” and therefore came as a surprise, but these claims made by Beijing to the Commission were far beyond what could be claimed under UNCLOS and infringed on both the EEZs and territorial seas of other littoral states. Rebuttal *note verbale* and relevant clarifications were made by Vietnam, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines between May 8, 2009, and April 5, 2011, which rejected the Chinese claim and asserted their own positions on the matter. China responded on April 14, 2011, by reiterating its claims and adding “China’s sovereignty and related rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea are supported by abundant historical and legal evidence.”<sup>250</sup>

<sup>250</sup> In 2016 the Chinese government released a white paper titled “China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea” which offers a loquacious explanation of China’s historical assertions which have been deconstructed by a number of scholars and lawyers and been found to be opportunistic historicism at best and propaganda at its lowest.

Adding to the confusion, the map offered by China in its *note verbale* did not include geographic coordinates for the dashes which marked out its claims. Calculations made by the US State Department the dashed line “encompasses approximately 2,000,000 square kilometers of maritime space, an area equal to about 22 percent of China’s land territory.”<sup>251</sup> The same report discusses the validity of China’s historical claims to the SCS through the lens of UNCLOS which does make limited concessions to the idea of historical waters, however the claims purported by the map in the *note verbale* did not pass any element of the three-part legal test described in UNCLOS’ Basis of Analysis, the report found that there was:<sup>252</sup>

- (1) *No open, notorious, and effective exercise of authority over the South China Sea.*  
-China has not communicated the nature of its claims, including giving specific geographic coordinates to these claims, to the international community in line with UNCLOS
- (2) *No continuous exercise of authority in the South China Sea*  
-In addition to the historic use of the SCS by all littoral states and other seafaring members of the international community, many of the islands and maritime features in the SCS are not occupied by China, rather by littoral states who use the waters/seabed for economic purposes
- (3) *No acquiescence by foreign States in China’s exercise of authority in the South China Sea.*  
-Per the report: “No State has recognized the validity of a historic claim by China to the area within the dashed line. Any alleged tacit acquiescence by States can be refuted by the lack of meaningful notoriety of any historic claim by China, discussed above. A claimant State therefore cannot rely on nonpublic or materially ambiguous claims as the foundation for acquiescence, but must instead establish its claims openly and publicly, and with sufficient clarity, so that other States may have actual knowledge of the nature and scope of those claims.”<sup>253</sup>

These claims by China, in addition to themselves causing significant ratcheting, form the basis of the SCS flashpoint and acted as the catalyst for the other three ratcheting events discussed below.

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<sup>251</sup> (Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs 2014, 4)

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21-22

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22



At the time of writing Beijing still holds steadfast to these claims both in the international arena as well as domestically. Demonstrating how sensitive these claims are, in an interesting crossover between pop-culture and international relations the nine-dash line appeared briefly in the 2023 *Barbie* film released by Warner Bros. Pictures, coincidentally during a period of heightened tensions, prompting the film to be banned in Vietnam and released in the Philippines only after a delay and an official government statement that “warns all filmmakers, producers, and distributors that it will not hesitate to sanction and/or ban films that exhibit the ‘nine-dash line’ for being contrary to the law”.<sup>254</sup>

### *The Great Wall of Sand*

In 2013 China began land reclamation projects across the various features it occupied in the SCS, transforming reefs, shoals, and atolls into artificial islands as well as adding dozens of acres to the ‘true’ islands it occupied. In addition to the irreparable ecological damage these artificial islands have inflicted on the delicate environment of the SCS, they have also acted as a considerable security ratchet on the region’s flashpoint. Called a “great wall of sand” by the former Commander of US Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris, these remote, highly sophisticated outposts of the PLA have fundamentally shifted the power dynamics in the region, far outclassing the capabilities of any other littoral claimant.<sup>255</sup>

The artificial islands which make up the ‘great wall of sand’ vary greatly both in their measurable area and in regard to their capacities as military installations. The largest, Fiery Cross Reef (677 acres), Subi Reef (976 acres), and Mischief Reef (1379 acres) host bomber-ready

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<sup>254</sup> (Rothwell 2023) (Westerman 2023)

<sup>255</sup> (Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr. 2015)

runways, climate-controlled hangars for aircraft,<sup>256</sup> deep resupply ports, extensive A2/AD systems, and facilities to station hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of PLA soldiers. The smaller artificial features such as Gaven Reef (34 acres) and Hughes Reef (19 acres) function as outposts, as opposed to military bases, hosting heliports rather than runways, shallow berths for ships, and more spartan accommodations for garrisoned troops.<sup>257</sup> China's artificial islands also host large radar arrays which monitor the air and sea of the surrounding area, some of which, such as the counter-stealth radar installation on Subi Reef and the ultrahigh frequency (UHF) radar on Mischief Reef, are on the cutting edge of early warning and surveillance technology. These installations work in unison to detect potential threats to the artificial islands and make first-strike operations against them more difficult, if not impossible for all but the leading global military powers.<sup>258</sup> China however is not the only great power to construct artificial islands, though it is certainly the most prolific land creator in recent decades, comparable military outposts can be seen in the United States' Johnson Atoll (now a wildlife refuge) and the United Kingdom's constructions on Diego Garcia.

These artificial islands require significant investments which can largely only be shouldered by China; while other claimants have conducted island building campaigns of their own, the largest being Vietnam, these are still dwarfed by those which make up the great wall of sand both in terms of acreage as well as strategic sophistication.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> This is particularly important, as these specialized hangars are necessary for long-term basing of aircraft on the artificial islands, as the local tropical environment, flush with sea breeze, is particularly corrosive to the sensitive equipment in modern aircraft.

<sup>257</sup> (Pasandideh 2021)

<sup>258</sup> (Lavengood, Examining the South China Sea dispute with general morphological analysis 2023, 11)

<sup>259</sup> (Sugita, Suzuki and Kaneko 2023)



Figure 9 A depiction of Chinese power projection capabilities from their outposts in the SCS | Outer dashed line- bomber aircraft, outer double line- fighter aircraft, inner dashed line- anti-ship cruise missiles, inner double line- surface-to-air missiles <sup>260</sup>

### *2013-2016 Arbitration - The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China*

The map submission and island building campaign by China mentioned in the two previous subsections, and the ratcheting they caused along with an increase in grey zone tactics by Beijing, prompted the Philippines to submit a case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague on January 22, 2013, which under Article 287 and Annex VII of UNCLOS (of which both are

<sup>260</sup> (CSIS, n.d.)

signatory to) has jurisdiction over maritime disputes relating to the treaty.<sup>261</sup> Per the Court's webpage on the case:

*The arbitration concerned the role of historic rights and the source of maritime entitlements in the South China Sea, the status of certain maritime features in the South China Sea, and the lawfulness of certain actions by China in the South China Sea that the Philippines alleged to be in violation of the Convention.*<sup>262</sup>

This case has had a lasting ratcheting of the SCS flashpoint which still resonates in contemporary discourse surrounding the dispute. The primary driver of this ratcheting was, and continues to be, Beijing's position of non-acceptance of the Court's jurisdiction on the issue. On February 19, 2013, China declared that it would not participate in, nor accept the ruling, of the arbitration court; nearly two years later, as the court case continued without their participation, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs authorized the release of a position paper on the matter. The 25 page document details Beijing's position, largely centering on the court's lack of jurisdiction, historical precedence (regarding claims), and the supremacy of sovereignty.<sup>263</sup> The paper closes its arguments with a firm rejection of the case and a redoubling of its territorial claims:

*The unilateral initiation of the present arbitration by the Philippines will not change the history and fact of China's sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands and the adjacent waters; nor will it shake China's resolve and determination to safeguard its sovereignty and maritime rights and interests; nor will it affect the policy and position of China to resolve the relevant disputes by direct negotiations and work together with other States in the region to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.*<sup>264</sup>

Undeterred, the Court and the Philippines continued to work through the case, with the tribunal ultimately taking up seven of the 15 submissions made by Manila.<sup>265</sup> On July 12, 2016, the court

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<sup>261</sup> (Kipgen 2020, 74)

<sup>262</sup> (Permanent Court of Arbitration n.d.)

<sup>263</sup> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China 2016)

<sup>264</sup> Ibid. p. 455

<sup>265</sup> (Kipgen 2020, 74)

announced its ruling, concluding that there was no historical basis to China's 9-dash claims and that its claims violated the EEZs of other littoral states. Additionally, the tribunal ruled that none of the disputed features, including Itu Aba/Taiping which is the largest natural feature in the SCS (occupied by Taiwan), is entitled to an EEZ or continental shelf claims of their own, and that many of the features asserted by Beijing to be islands are in fact 'low-tide features' and therefore not entitled to any maritime zones. Indeed, the largest of China's artificial islands, Mischief Reef, along with the Second Thomas Shoal were ruled to be low-tide elevations within the EEZ of the Philippines regardless of the reclamation and construction work China had been conducting since 2013.<sup>266</sup>

The submission of the case to the Court, the subsequent ruling, and its rejection by the PRC have all served as ratcheting events which continue to reverberate today, as other claimants can now cite the case as a legally based rejection of China's claims to the SCS. The issue remains sensitive for China and is often mentioned in statements by members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including by Wang Yi the 'wolf warrior' diplomat and Director of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Office who was cited in a public release by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs on July 15, 2023, stating:

*Wang Yi stressed that the South China Sea arbitration is apparently a political manipulation, deviating from the original intention of the UNCLOS. With obvious flaws in fact-finding and application of laws, the case has been widely questioned by international law experts. China did not take part in the case from the very beginning and will never accept it. China urges certain countries to stop turning back the wheel of history and stop playing up the outdated "old drama".<sup>267</sup>*

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid. 77

<sup>267</sup> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023)

However, none of this has discouraged island building in the region- both by China or by other claimants. ‘New’ islands continue to appear in the region and those which already exist, artificial or otherwise, continue to be improved and expanded upon. These developments are no secret, and in fact can be viewed in near real-time by any analyst or curious world-citizen for free on platforms such as Google Maps, and for a small fee, one can commission customized, high-definition satellite imagery of these growing outposts from Maxar Technologies or any number of other private satellite firms.<sup>268</sup>

### *Rejuvenation of US-Philippines Security Partnership*

The most recent ratcheting event of note has been a rejuvenation of the US-Philippines security partnership which culminated in the February 2023 revival of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (ECDA). Though signed originally in 2014, legal and political challenges within the Philippines centering on President Rodrigo Duterte’s attempt at establishing a less confrontational relationship with China delayed the full implementation of the deal until the current Ferdinand Marcos Jr.<sup>269</sup> administration which began in June 2022.<sup>270</sup> In summation, the ECDA allows US forces rotational access to nine military installations on Philippine territory in exchange for financing a modernization of both Filipino forces, as well as the installations American forces will have access to per the agreement. Funding is drawn from the Pentagon’s Pacific Deterrence Initiative, which for the fiscal year of 2024 had requested \$9.1 billion dollars.<sup>271</sup> The modernization’s goal is to bring the Philippine military to a status of minimum-

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<sup>268</sup> For example: Mischief Reef (<https://www.google.com/maps/@9.904078,115.5321443,6588m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu>) Firey Cross Reef (<https://www.google.com/maps/@9.5504171,112.8933597,3743m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu>)

<sup>269</sup> Often referred to in media by his nickname ‘bongbong’

<sup>270</sup> (Chang 2023)

<sup>271</sup> (Lariosa 2024)

credible defense in the region and deter what is perceived in Manila as an increasingly bellicose China.<sup>272</sup>

The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) run by CSIS identifies Second Thomas Shoal, a maritime feature roughly 200km from the Philippine island of Palawan, as the focal point of frictions between the Philippines and China.<sup>273</sup> Recent provocations by the Chinese Navy (PLAN)<sup>274</sup> center on a WW2-era American landing ship given to the Philippine Navy in the 1970s, the *BRP Sierra Madre*, which was purposefully beached on the shoal by the Philippine Navy in 1999 to act as an outpost to reinforce its claims.<sup>275</sup> The PLAN has maintained regular patrol of the shoal since 2013 and harassed the Philippine Navy's attempts to resupply and reinforce the *Sierra Madre*, such as in 2014 when supplies were blocked by sea for three weeks which forced a supply by airdrop. Resupply missions continue to be harassed by watercannons, lasers, and other grey zone tactics which avoid the use of kinetic force. Beginning in 2021-22 Chinese provocations increased substantially, with AMTI observing that the average number of PLAN ships at the Shoal during resupply missions increasing from one in 2021, to four in 2022, and in 2023 peaking at 14; this is in contrast to the just two to three vessels the Philippine navy has sent to the Shoal during these missions; in a particularly staunch show of force, the PLAN sent 46 ships to harass four Filipino ships during a supply mission on December 10, 2023.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> (Chang 2023)

<sup>273</sup> (CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2024)

<sup>274</sup> Formally the Chinese military as a whole is named the People's Liberation Army (PLA), with naval and air components being the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) respectively.

<sup>275</sup> (Hoppe 2022)

<sup>276</sup> (CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2024)

This harassment's increasing tenacity, as well as diplomatic threats from Beijing, acted as a catalyst for the rejuvenation of the US-Philippine security relationship. The installations opened to the US by the ECDA largely center on the SCS and feature a critical air power component, not only in the sense of kinetic air power, but also substantial logistical capabilities as is showcased by the considerable development being conducted on ECDA airfields, largely being paid for by US funds.<sup>277</sup> The double-ratcheting effect of an extra-regional power, the US, being invited to the theater cannot be understated, and indeed is made even more critical in conjunction with the more wide-scoped US-China rivalry. From the perspective of the PRC, the diplomatic ratcheting centers on the US' presence rebuffing attempts at regional hegemony and interfering in bi-lateral relations between Manila and Beijing; as well ratcheting occurs due to the Chinese perception that the ECDA, if successful in its goals of building the Philippines' minimum credible defense, could be marketed to other claimant states which face power-disparity in relation to the PRC, primarily Vietnam.<sup>278</sup> The security ratcheting is evident, in that increasing the Philippines' military capacity increases its deterrence, however, it should also be viewed through the wider geopolitical lens of the Asian Supercomplex provided in RSCT.<sup>279</sup> Chinese security thought posits that control of the maritime region referred to as the "first island chain"<sup>280</sup> is paramount to insulate the Chinese mainland from extra-regional threats, and with Japan and Taiwan solidly placed contra the PRC within the wider US 'spoke-and-wheel' alliance system, a more militarily robust Philippines with added US asset placement would contribute to the perception of a

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<sup>277</sup> (CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023)

<sup>278</sup> Vietnam however is much more cautious of its relationship with the PRC, this is due to the security concerns of sharing a land border as well as retaining a living memory of a hot war with the PRC in 1979. However as is showcased in their 2019 white paper, the Vietnamese government still remains resistant to binding security relationships with outside powers.

<sup>279</sup> (Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* 2003, xxvi)

<sup>280</sup> The first island chain extends from the Japanese archipelago, through the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan, to the Philippine archipelago.



strategic encirclement.<sup>281</sup> Assuming that the US would honor its security obligations to its ally in the event of a kinetic PRC-Philippines conflict, these new installations and their based assets could prove to offset much of the strategic advantage given to the PLA/N by way of their artificial island outposts.

## **6.2 Drivers of the South China Sea Flashpoint**

The SCS is hosts a high volatility flashpoint, in contrast to the Arctic's low volatility discussed in the previous chapter. This flashpoint is at the far end of the volatility spectrum and is vulnerable to ignition through a short succession of ratcheting events, or even a single event of sufficient magnitude which might spiral out of control.<sup>282</sup> The drivers of the SCS's flashpoint are increasingly being viewed through the lens of zero-sum thinking as well as play into wider global tensions related to China's rise to prominence in the world-system. High volatility flashpoints are inherently more complex than those of lower volatility; there are simply more moving parts. For this reason, not every facet of the SCS's flashpoint can be examined in detail outside of specialized academic works which focus solely on the disputes in the SCS. However, important themes can be generalized through a survey of key drivers of the flashpoint by way of the three primary disputes which contribute to flashpoints: territorial, political, and socio-economic. These demonstrate the trends of high volatility surrounding the flashpoint as well as convey the volatility of relations in the region.

As will become apparent, a reoccurring theme in these disputes is the disparity between the PRC and other claimants in nearly every fashion- military capacity, economic size, diplomatic clout, etc. which gives Beijing superior leverage in nearly every encounter, compelling other claimants

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<sup>281</sup> (Yoshihara 2012)

<sup>282</sup> As well, an ignition can occur with a single deliberate act of aggression which can act as a catalyst.

to remain reactive, as opposed to proactive in the drivers below. While this is true to varying degrees for nearly every state in the world-system, given China's meteoric rise over the last 30 years, in the regional context of the SCS, other littoral states are truly dwarfed in relevant metrics: China's 2022 GDP eclipses the combined total of other claimant's by nearly \$9 to \$1,<sup>283</sup> its fleet of combat aircraft compared to the combined total of other claimants is 3.5 to 1,<sup>284</sup> and its total number of diplomatic missions (274) is more than double that of the next regional high (Malaysia 106).<sup>285</sup> These realities place China in a domineering position in the region and must be appreciated in order to fully understand the SCS flashpoint. Additionally, while there are bilateral contentions between the non-PRC claimants in the SCS, the limited power projection and otherwise friendly-to-neutral patterns of amity and enmity between them leaves an open question as to whether there would be sufficient securitization around the SCS dispute to form a flashpoint without Beijing's participation in the drivers below.<sup>286</sup> Finally, it should be noted that while both the PRC and ROC maintain similarly large claims to the SCS, the ROC is comparatively docile in the dispute, occupying only one maritime feature and refraining from the assertive actions of its mainland counterpart.<sup>287</sup>

Furthermore, the analysis below focuses primarily on affairs between China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, though not necessarily in a tri-lateral sense. While other claimants certainly hold regional contentions due to the overlapping claims of the SCS, and this is no attempt at disparaging any of those contentions, these three are the most active in affairs concerning the

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<sup>283</sup> USD, 2022 GDP figures (World Bank n.d.), Taiwan GDP data is not collected by the World Bank and was sourced from (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China 2022)

<sup>284</sup> (Flight International & Embraer 2024, 12-34) this also does not take into account the capabilities of these combat aircraft, which again is in China's favor.

<sup>285</sup> (Lowy Institute 2023)

<sup>286</sup> (Member of the HOR of the Philippines 2023)

<sup>287</sup> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan 2016) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan n.d.)

region's flashpoint, especially in consideration of the number of mutual ratcheting events and the likelihood of kinetic conflict.

South China Sea Flashpoint		
Type of dispute	Drivers	Key issues
Territorial	historical roots, contemporary security concerns	Conflicting claims over maritime boundaries, security concerns over 'first island chain' and minimum credible defense
Political	international orders of power	PRC as a rising regional/global hegemon, littoral states' resistance to PRC assertions
Socio-economic	economic stability/security	Resource extraction rights (fishing & hydrocarbons)

Table 4 Drivers of the South China Sea Flashpoint

Territorial

*Lines on a Map, but Whose Map?*

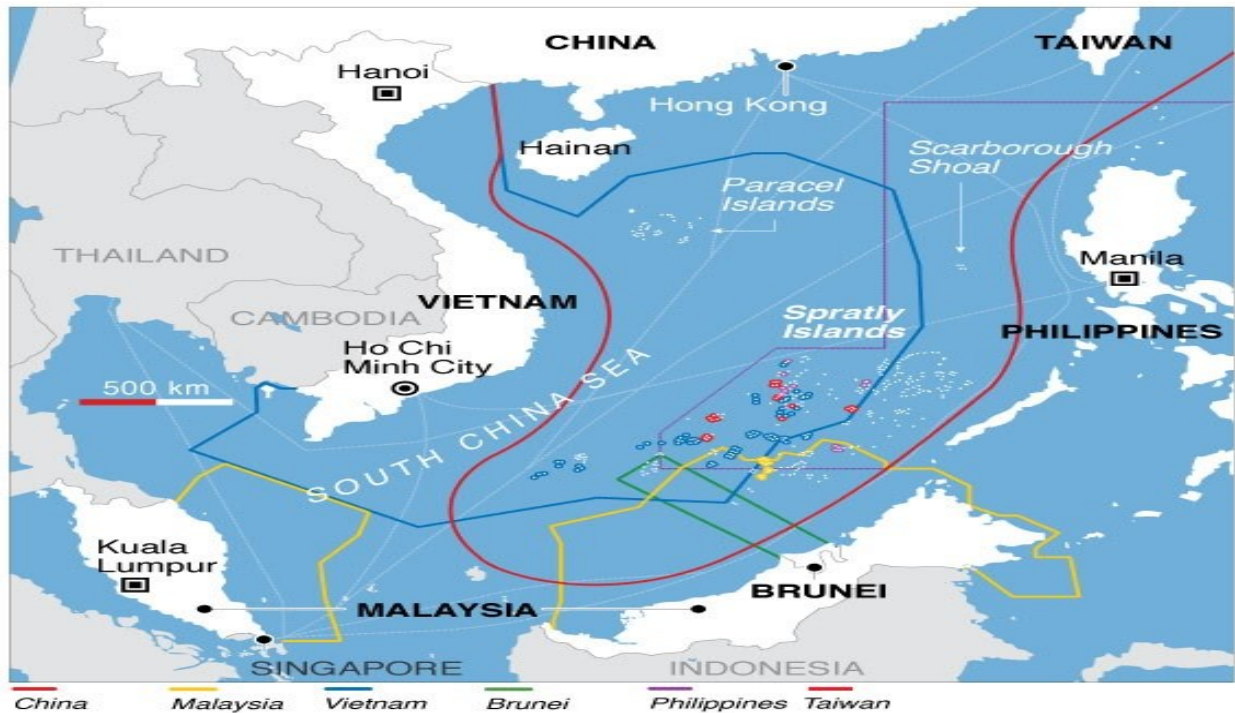


Figure 10 Map of maritime claims in the SCS: Red- China/Taiwan, Yellow- Malaysia, Blue- Vietnam, Green- Brunei, Purple- Philippines (Taiwanese occupied islands in pink)

As would be expected with a high volatility flashpoint, the dialogue and discourse between states in the SCS has reached a level where open hostility is not uncommon and diplomatic maneuvers over influence have been securitized. There is no shortage of bi-lateral and multi-lateral affairs, and unilateral actions which can be analyzed in relation to the SCS's flashpoint, yet, surely none is more consequential than the multi-lateral maritime boundaries dispute which lies at the heart of the flashpoint (figure 10). As was alluded to in this chapter's historical overview, a complexity of overlapping claims, asserted boundaries, rightful EEZs, and other diplomatic delineations have driven contentions in the region since the end of the Second World War, accelerating at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and reaching critical tensions after 2013 and the beginning of China's island building campaign. As will be evident in the later subsections of this chapter, these disputed boundaries are tied to nearly every aspect of the SCS's flashpoint.

The conflicting claims are a sustaining ratchet on the flashpoint and are frequently mentioned in internal and external facing media, government reports and releases, statements by government officials, and official state strategies. These boundaries are viewed through a zero-sum lens by littoral states, and to date there has been no attempt by claimants, or any other body, for a format to settle the issue. As states refuse to meet to discuss the issues of the boundaries themselves, with the goal of coming to an equitable agreement on maritime boundaries, there are few avenues available for de-escalation; since the boundaries dispute forms the core of the overall flashpoint, other de-escalatory measures on other issues are hobbled by the inflexibility of states on this matter.

Though the territorial contentions exist between all claimant states, the issue has largely centered on littoral states rejecting the assertion by the PRC that the lion's share of the SCS, both maritime features as well as the waters themselves, are within Beijing's jurisdiction. During a

series of interviews conducted by the author with members of the Philippine government, academic society, and military in 2023, a consistent theme of response was the notion that, broadly speaking, the ASEAN littoral members would be able to resolve the dispute collectively, or at the very least manage tensions to what would be labeled in this study as low volatility, without the involvement of China.<sup>288</sup> However a combination of China's strengths as an actor, and the comparative weaknesses of other actors involved in the dispute has permitted the former to assert its position forcefully in many occasions as is demonstrated by its seizure of multiple maritime features and continuing harassment of other littoral states' civilian and military fleets. From the perspective of China, the SCS boundaries are both a sovereignty and a security issue which centers on the ability, and by means of claiming sovereignty the right, to maintain stewardship over the SCS with coercive means if necessary. Focusing first on perceptions of sovereignty, China asserts historical roots to its claims in the SCS stretching over 2000 years. The 2016 white paper released by Beijing in response to the arbitration case put forth by the Philippines maintains that:

*The activities of the Chinese people in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago. China is the first to have discovered, named, and explored and exploited Nanhai Zhudao and relevant waters, and the first to have continuously, peacefully and effectively exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over them. China's sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao and relevant rights and interests in the South China Sea have been established in the long course of history, and are solidly grounded in history and law.*<sup>289</sup>

Specifically, these arguments are rooted in both "right of discovery" as well as "historic title" in the same white paper:

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<sup>288</sup> Interviews conducted between February and March 2023

<sup>289</sup> (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2016, #3) Nanhai Zhudao (南海诸岛) is the collective term used by the PRC for the islands of the SCS

*The Chinese people have since ancient times lived and engaged in production activities on Nanhai Zhudao and in relevant waters. China is the first to have discovered, named, and explored and exploited Nanhai Zhudao and relevant waters, and the first to have continuously, peacefully and effectively exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over them, thus establishing sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao and the relevant rights and interests in the South China Sea.*<sup>290</sup>

These historical claims are frequently used by Beijing to securitize the SCS territorial dispute, and as is pointed out by Nian Peng, are often used in the increasingly nationalist rhetoric espoused in Chinese diplomacy surrounding the issue.<sup>291</sup> This securitization has led the issue of sovereignty taking center stage and cemented the idea that the *Nanhai Zhudao* and the waters of the SCS are inherently, and inseparably, Chinese territory. Though other claimants also make similar assertions, none have the same maximalist claims as China and only make partial claims to the SCS's waters and maritime features.<sup>292</sup>

Regarding security, China perceives itself as vulnerable to a geographic corral which in the event of a geopolitical crisis could choke it off from the vital sea routes which sustain its economy<sup>293</sup>; for this reason, control over the first island chain, of which islands in the SCS form the southern end of, is paramount and as an issue is heavily securitized. The idea first began to gain traction in Chinese strategic thinking in the 1980s and became more engrained in the following decades as China's military capabilities and geopolitical footprint grew.<sup>294</sup> Detailing the strategic concerns are two excerpts from publications authored by Chinese military officers penned in 2002 and 2007 respectively:

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid. #8

<sup>291</sup> (Peng 2022)

<sup>292</sup> Vietnam, for example, cites the succession of title to its SCS claims from colonial France as well as from the pre-colonial feudal Vietnamese state which, according to their sources, had effectively controlled the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. (Pham 2014, 55)

<sup>293</sup> Both by means of trade as well as energy security.

<sup>294</sup> (Yoshihara 2012, 298)

*Even though our nation is a great littoral power, the sea areas surrounding our nation are either sealed off or semi-sealed off....This has further added strategic from the seas upon China while increasing the difficulty and complexity of China's maritime defense. (Maj. Gen. Peng Guangqian 2002)*

*These islands obstruct China's reach to the sea....The partially sealed-off nature of China's maritime region has clearly brought about negative effects in China's maritime security....Because of the nature of geography, China can be easily blockaded and cut off from the sea, and Chinese coastal defense forces are difficult to concentrate. (Sr. Col. Feng Liang & Lt. Col. Duan Tingzhi 2007)<sup>295</sup>*

Critical then to avoid this corral is control over the maritime features in the SCS. As the map in the historical sub-section *Great Wall of Sand* makes evident, current military assets based on the artificial islands in the Spratly and Paracels aim to give the PLA/N/AF both a deep domain awareness as well as significant A2/AD coverage over much of the SCS to alleviate these concerns. This, however, presents a ratcheting security dilemma for other claimants who not only face a significant disparity in military capabilities in relation to the China in objective terms, but also find national territory under China's A2/AD coverage and within range of PLAAF aircraft based on the artificial islands.<sup>296</sup> This has prompted a drive among other claimants, most notably the Philippines and Vietnam, to invest heavily in military modernization programs which look to bring their force power up to a level of minimum credible defense with the PLA/N/AF.<sup>297</sup>

These modernization programs have centered largely on A2/AD systems, naval forces (especially submarines), as well as new aircraft to replace Cold-War era inventories or to create new force capacity outright. As these systems come with high price tags, both Hanoi and Manila have

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<sup>295</sup> Both cited in (Yoshihara 2012, 299-300)

<sup>296</sup> For example, according to CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative power projection maps of PLA/N/AF assets based on the largest artificial islands, all of the Philippine's Palawan island, much of central and southern Vietnam, the entirety of Brunei, and much of Malaysia's Sabah state are within strike range of J-15 fighters based on the islands, importantly this also allows strategic bombers (such as the Xian H-6) and AEWG planes (such as the KJ-500) to fly with escort on combat and surveillance missions (CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2021)

<sup>297</sup> (Zhao and Qi 2016, 487-489) (de Castro 2017, 559-560)

looked to find suppliers which can meet both budgetary restrictions as well as domain requirements. In a 2024 speech at the Lowy Institute Philippine President Marcos Jr. announced he had approved the “Re-Horizon 3” acquisition plan for the Armed forces of the Philippines, a nearly two trillion Philippine pesos (\$35 billion USD) modernization program, and the final stage of a modernization initiative which began in 2013; specifically Re-Horizon 3 focuses on C4ISR<sup>298</sup> which aims to fully modernize the Philippine’s domain awareness.<sup>299</sup> During this speech as well, President Marcos Jr. discussed the importance his government places on this program and its success:

*We shall never surrender even a square inch of our territory and our maritime jurisdiction....In this regard, we are upgrading the capabilities of our Coast Guard and pursuing the modernization of our Armed Forces....And earlier this year, I approved the updated acquisition plan of the Armed Forces of the Philippines called Re-Horizon 3, in line with our Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept....Our forces must be able to guarantee, to the fullest extent possible, Filipino nationals, Philippine corporations, and those authorized by the Philippine Government, unimpeded and peaceful exploration and exploitation of all natural resources in areas where we have jurisdiction, including and especially our exclusive economic zone, in accordance with international law....Philippine agencies, forces, and institutions are working to strengthen our capabilities....We are on the frontline of international efforts to preserve, defend, and uphold the rules-based international order — the same platform from which the postwar Asian economic miracles took off, and upon which the continued prosperity of countries like Australia relies....Ladies and gentlemen, we, in the Indo-Pacific, cannot ignore the existential impact of great power rivalries upon the survival of our peoples and our communities.<sup>300</sup>*

Modernization is also a priority for the US/Philippines EDCA, which in its updated guidelines in 2023 states in a dedicated section that the US and Philippines will:

*a. COORDINATE closely on the Philippines’ defense budget planning, including through the development of a Security Sector Assistance Roadmap to identify priority defense platforms and*

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<sup>298</sup> C4ISR- Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

<sup>299</sup> (Saballa 2024)

<sup>300</sup> (President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. 2024)



*force packages over the next five years to bolster our combined capabilities and capacity to resist coercion and deter aggression;*

*b. PRIORITIZE the procurement of interoperable defense platforms in line with the MAA and sourced from various U.S. programs, including but not limited to Foreign Military Financing, Foreign Military Sales, and Excess Defense Articles in addition to the Philippines' national defense procurement and funding initiatives;*

*c. EXPAND investments in non-materiel defense capacity building in the form of education and training exchanges, as well as through training, exercises, and other operational activities through the MDB-SEB process.<sup>301</sup>*

Though the Vietnamese arms sector, and wider military capacity, is in a much more robust state than the Philippines, it still does not present a clear minimum credible defense in light of a potential conflict with its northern neighbor. Budgetary restraints have slowed procurement since 2016, though despite this modernization continues. Hanoi has looked to rely less on its historical arms supplier, Russia, and diversify its security assets by creating partnerships with Israel, Japan, India, South Korea, and even its former enemy the United States; ongoing sanctions due to Russia's war in Ukraine are likely to amplify these trends.<sup>302</sup> Similar to the Philippines, Vietnam's goal is to establish A2/AD capabilities which are "capable of inflicting a level of damage on Chinese forces that would be unacceptable to Beijing" and improve its domain awareness through command and control technologies.<sup>303</sup> However, due to Vietnam's land border with China, and its lack of a major strategic ally, as the Philippines has with the US, the strategic and tactical deficits are that much greater to fill. As is pointed out by Shang-su Wu, these shortcomings prove significant in light of a potential ignition of the SCS's flashpoint, though could serve to discourage hostile action by China:

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<sup>301</sup> (United States Department of Defense 2023)

<sup>302</sup> (Institute for Strategic Studies 2023, 2)

<sup>303</sup> Ibid. p.6

*The similarity between the Russian-originated weapon systems that Vietnam and China both use, Vietnam's quantitative inferiority, and its limited surveillance capability make it unlikely that Vietnam's denial-oriented military strategy will be able to counter fully the might even of China's Guangzhou Military Region alone. Thus—unless the VPAN and the VPAAF<sup>304</sup> develop some new tactics that would constitute a significant surprise to their Chinese counterparts—Hanoi's present military assets likely are insufficient to achieve the asymmetrical effects at which its sea-denial strategy aims. Strengthening that deterrence at least would ameliorate Vietnam's situation in the geostrategic landscape, including in its bilateral relations with China.<sup>305</sup>*

While modernization programs are unable to match the overall power of the PLA/N/AF numerically, they are able to provide the necessary power in-theater which can deter Chinese aggression. However, as these programs are a decades-long process requiring extensive negotiations, manufacturing, and training; there will still be, for the time being, a capabilities gap in the SCS which favors China. Ironically, these modernization programs and their goal of deterrence is itself a ratchet on the SCS's flashpoint as it presents another security dilemma, this time for Beijing. As other claimants increase their military capacity in the theater, the PLA/N/AF must in-turn increase its presence in the region and commit more resources, which in-turn, prompts other claimants to invest in their militaries more heavily; this unfortunate feedback loop is indicative of high volatility flashpoints and points to a further slipping down the volatility spectrum towards possible ignition.

### Socio-economic

#### *Securing trade and resources*

The SCS has been a focal point of Southeast and East Asian commerce for millennia and has grown in importance over time towards its status today as one of the world-system's main economic areas. On the sea's surface between 20% and 33% of annual global trade sails along

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<sup>304</sup> Vietnamese People's Navy & Air Force, respectfully.

<sup>305</sup> (Wu 2017, 16)

trade routes between manufacturers and markets valued at more than \$3.4 trillion USD, additionally more than 80% of the crude oil destined for China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan passes through the SCS on tankers.<sup>306</sup> Below the surface are incredibly productive fishing grounds which provide roughly 12% of global catch totals and employ more than half of all maritime fishing vessels globally.<sup>307</sup> Even further down, below the seabed, are extensive deposits of oil and gas, 11 billion barrels and 190 trillion cubic feet in proved and probable reserves respectively, which hold the potential to power East and Southeast Asian economies for decades and provide billions of dollars' worth of revenues.<sup>308</sup>

The economic drivers of the SCS flashpoint are intricately linked to the maritime boundaries dispute, centering on littoral states' claims to stewardship and exclusive access to particular areas and the resources which are found there, primarily hydrocarbons and living resources (fish). These economic components have contributed to tensions and have caused multiple ratcheting events in the disputed littoral areas and the in the areas around disputed maritime features.

Beginning with hydrocarbons, control over the SCS's hydrocarbon deposits (proven or otherwise) has significantly contributed to the region's flashpoint. Regardless of whether the deposits prove profitable, they are a source of contention among claimants and as an issue, have been securitized and intertwined with the larger boundaries dispute. The most recurrent ratcheting events which occur regarding hydrocarbons are incursions into EEZs with military and civilian vessels, overwhelmingly instigated by China, around the numerous extraction platforms

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<sup>306</sup> (Uren 2020) (O'Rourke, U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress 2024, 6)

<sup>307</sup> (Osthagen, Vidas and Jensen 2017)

<sup>308</sup> (US Eneergy Information Administration 2013)

which dot the littoral region of the SCS.<sup>309</sup> In regard to the flashpoint, there have been two particular ratcheting events of note, both of which occurred between China and Vietnam.

The first is a series of related encounters occurring from 2011 to 2012, as seismic survey ships owned by the Vietnamese state oil company PetroVietnam were continuously harassed by Chinese fishing vessels (part of the ‘maritime militia’<sup>310</sup>) while conducting hydrocarbon surveys off the coast of Vietnam. The vessels proceeded to employ “cable cutting devices” to sever the links between the survey buoys and the Vietnamese ships while conducting dangerous sailing maneuvers<sup>311</sup> which could have caused a collision; the first occurrence in 2011 even sparked street protests in Hanoi, a rare occurrence in the authoritarian state.<sup>312</sup> Though eventually relations between the PRC and Vietnam moved past the event, it had a lasting effect on PRC public diplomacy within Vietnam.

The second, and more significant, occurred in 2014 and centered on an oil platform owned by the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) which was moved into Vietnam’s claimed EEZ near the disputed Paracel islands. The platform prompted an immediate response from Vietnam, who denounced the move as illegal and, in a ratcheting move itself, began to court international support for its position both within the ASEAN forum, but also from extra-regional actors.<sup>313</sup> This event also sparked domestic protests within Vietnam, however

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<sup>309</sup> (CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023) (CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023)

<sup>310</sup> The maritime militia is a grey zone force employed by China in many of its interactions in the SCS. In short, it is an official appendage of the PLAN comprised of fishing trawlers and other similar vessels which work in large or small groups to harass the naval and civilian vessels of other states whenever sending a PLAN/CG ship would be perceived as too aggressive/ratcheting. For more see *A Short History of China’s Fishing Militia and What it May Tell Us* (2020) by Grossman and Ma, published by the Rand Corporation

<sup>311</sup> In this context, dangerous maneuvers include sailing tactics designed to coerce another ship into changing course as well as ‘playing chicken’ to achieve the same goal.

<sup>312</sup> (Brummitt 2012) (Nguyn, et al. 2011)

<sup>313</sup> (Amer 2014)

during this period of ratcheting some of these protests became violent and saw the burning and looting Chinese owned shops and factories.<sup>314</sup> The platform was eventually withdrawn by China after two months (one month ahead of CNOOC's public schedule), likely in an attempt to ease tensions which were quickly ratcheting beyond what was the cost-benefit of the drilling/exploration as hostile encounters were increasing at sea, prompting Vietnam to claim a victory against its neighbor.<sup>315</sup> The withdraw had immediate de-escalation effects on the flashpoint, as well, the 2014 event's showed that littoral states were willing to go toe-to-toe with Beijing over maritime boundaries even in light of their limited military capacities. Though the maritime encounters during this event remained non-kinetic (in the military sense) there was deliberate ramming of vessels on both sides, and it is no stretch of analytical imagination to envision a scenario where such an occurrence, especially in times of heightened tensions, can act as a catalyst for flashpoint ignition.

To date, both China and Vietnam have continued to work to improve their hydrocarbon prospects in the SCS despite objections from one another. As China further improves its maritime capabilities, its ability to coordinate grey zone tactics to harass Vietnamese exploration and extraction operations grows in-step as does the likelihood of ratcheting events.

Hydrocarbon extraction is not the only resource at stake in the SCS, living resources (primarily fish) also spark similar harassment and aggression between fishing vessels of claimant states and the PLAN/maritime militia. Similar as well to hydrocarbons, the root cause of contentions surrounding fishing are disputed claims regarding the precise delineation of territorial waters and

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<sup>314</sup> (A. Taylor 2014) As well, Korean, Taiwanese, and other foreign factories were burnt, but this is assumed to be due to confusion by the protestors.

<sup>315</sup> (Green, et al. 2017)

EEZs.<sup>316</sup> The inhabitants of the region place an existential imperative on the living resources of the SCS, which constitutes not only a significant employer and source of income for lower classes, undereducated communities, but also form an important nutritional component of their daily diet, with the majority of the 190 million littoral residents (some 77%) relying on protein being sourced from aquatic animals.<sup>317</sup> Disputes over fishing in the SCS can act as ratcheting events in a number of ways which resonate with domestic populations, primarily due to the importance of fishing for local communities and the direct link the civilian crews have with the wider population base.

Hostile encounters in the SCS related to fishing have become increasingly aggressive since 2013, with the PLAN/maritime militia most often initiating these encounters<sup>318</sup> which can include harassment<sup>319</sup> (shooting water cannons, dangerous maneuvering), seizing ships<sup>320</sup> (including detainment of crews), as well as damaging and sinking vessels in disputed waters.<sup>321</sup> Each instance of harassment has a ratcheting effect, and while any individual encounter itself is unlikely to act as an ignition event on the flashpoint, they can be the first event in a final casual chain, the final ratchet so to speak, which leads to the ignition of the SCS's flashpoint; this is particularly salient in the event of a high-casualty encounter. As the PLAN often acts as the aggressor, these encounters can draw other claimants closer together with shared grievances despite the existence of mutually exclusive maritime claims. For example, in 2020 after a

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<sup>316</sup> (Zhang and Bateman 2017)

<sup>317</sup> (Li and Amer 2015, 139)

<sup>318</sup> Though other claimants have in the past seized vessels or conducted other hostile encounters over fishing in the SCS, the overwhelming number the encounters in question are initiated by China. Deductive reasoning for this suggests that this is due to the PRC's vast maritime claims which overlap significantly with other states, while in turn these states' own claims and related fishing grounds (in relation to one another) remain comparatively distant.

<sup>319</sup> (Lavery 2023) (Mandhana 2023)

<sup>320</sup> (Bernini 2017) (Bengali and Vo 2020)

<sup>321</sup> (Wright 2023) (AFP 2022)

Vietnamese fishing vessel was sunk in the SCS after being rammed by a PLAN Coast Guard vessel, the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs released a “statement of solidarity” supporting Vietnam:

*The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) expresses deep concern over the reported sinking on 03 April 2020 of a Vietnamese fishing vessel in the South China Sea. Our own similar experience revealed how much trust in a friendship is lost by it; and how much trust was created by Vietnam’s humanitarian act of directly saving the lives of our Filipino fishermen. We have not stopped and will not stop thanking Vietnam. It is with that in mind that we issue this statement of solidarity... There is never a good time to indulge in provocations; they usually end in defeat of aggression or a devastating price of victory. But it is always a good time to rise in the defense and affirmation of our respective sovereignties and in the peace and stability of our region especially in a time of pandemic. As we have said the creation of new facts in the water will never give rise to legal right anywhere or anytime. We therefore urge forbearance and good behavior to each and every government; and to extend that forbearance and behavior to people under our respective jurisdictions.<sup>322</sup>*

In addition to maritime claims contributing to the ratcheting surrounding fishing in the SCS, increasingly the environment has become a factor in the SCS dispute with anthropogenic sources. The first is global climate change which, as with the Arctic, is heating the waters of the SCS to unrecorded levels. This rise in temperatures is having a direct impact on marine life, both by way of affecting life cycles as well as causing a shift in migration patterns which lowers overall fish stocks.<sup>323</sup> The second is overfishing, a product of significant advances in fishing techniques and technology (dredging, spotter planes, marine radar, etc.) as well as a boom in the fishing industry which has seen fish stocks deteriorate to 10% of 1950 levels and catch rates (the number of fish caught per trip) dropping by 75% over the last two decades.<sup>324</sup> Since 1999 China has imposed a unilateral fishing ban during the summer months in areas north of 12 degrees

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<sup>322</sup> (Republic of the Philippines, Department of Foreign Affairs 2020)

<sup>323</sup> (Hu, et al. 2022)

<sup>324</sup> (Ngo 2023) (Greer 2016)

latitude in the SCS which, according to the PRC State Council, is intended to “promote sustainable marine fishery development and improve marine ecology.”<sup>325</sup> Despite the rejection of this ban by other littoral states, many fisherman still tread carefully as the ban is enforced by the PLAN which can seize vessels and impose fines of tens of thousands of dollars, a significant sum to many fishing operations.<sup>326</sup> Nonetheless destructive fishing practices continue and as fish stocks continue to disappear the value of living resources will rise both monetarily as well as existentially. As these stocks shrink, the likelihood of hostile encounters over fishing increases as well and the risk of ratcheting events between claimants.

### Political

#### *Growing Pains: The Rise of China*

China’s meteoric rise from its status as a developing and isolated state, to the highest levels of international power within the span of only a few decades is unprecedented in human history; the reach of this new international power is felt globally, but few experience China’s growth as intimately as its neighbors.<sup>327</sup> Throughout this rise, there has been widespread speculation as to China’s capacity to act as a regional hegemon by way of displacing/subverting Western and Japanese geopolitical influence in the region as well as curating regional economics to fit its internal and external needs.<sup>328</sup> This subsection applies a regional definition of Immanuel Wallerstein’s ideas regarding hegemony, namely that a hegemon is:

*[A] situation in which the ongoing rivalry between the so-called "great powers" is so unbalanced that one power can largely impose its rules and its wishes (at the very least by effective veto power) in the economic, political, military, diplomatic, and even cultural arenas. The material*

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<sup>325</sup> (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2023)

<sup>326</sup> (Ngo 2023)

<sup>327</sup> (Bibhudatta 2021) (Wester 2023)

<sup>328</sup> This speculation, and in some cases fear mongering, has been a facet of academic focus on the region since at least the early 1990s ex. *Hegemon on the Horizon? China's threat to East Asian Security* (Roy 1994)



*base of such power lies in the ability of enterprises domiciled in that power to operate more efficiently in all three major economic arenas: agro-industrial production, commerce, and finance. The edge in efficiency of which we are speaking is one so great that these enterprises can not only outbid enterprises domiciled in other great powers in the world market in general, but quite specifically in very many instances within the home markets of the rival powers themselves.*<sup>329</sup>

While China remains unable to claim the status as a global hegemon, such as Great Britain in the late 1800s to early 1900s, or the United States during the 1990s to early 2000s, is certainly has sufficient geopolitical weight to be considered a rising hegemonic power in the littoral area of the South China Sea and more broadly in Southeast Asia. As was mentioned in the beginning of this section, China outclasses all other claimant states on every relevant material metric by a significant order of magnitude. However, to make the assertion that China is an inchoate regional hegemon it must be demonstrated there is a deference by other states, even if begrudgingly, to China's power; while this deference is not absolute, the caution with which other claimants treat bi-lateral relations with China shows that there is an inherent inequality in regional dynamics which suggests hegemonic activity.<sup>330</sup> The political resent to which other actors feel towards Beijing's hegemonic pressures acts as a ratcheting on the SCS's flashpoint.

Deference in the matter of hegemony is complex and includes not only a passive attitude by other states towards the hegemon in international affairs, but also is indicated by a restraint in response and public acknowledgement of leadership (sincere or otherwise).<sup>331</sup> For example, in 2017 Vietnam suspended a hydrocarbon drilling project in conjunction with a subsidiary of Spanish petrochemical conglomerate Repsol after pressure from Beijing due to the project site

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<sup>329</sup> (Wallerstein, *The Three Instances of Hegemony in the History of the Capitalist World-Economy* 1984, 101)

<sup>330</sup> (Heydarian 2019)

<sup>331</sup> (Womack 2009, 110-118) (Wolf 2022)

being located within an area of Vietnam’s EEZ which is under bi-lateral dispute.<sup>332</sup> According to a BBC report citing a Vietnamese diplomatic source, China had threatened to attack Vietnamese outposts in the Spratly Islands if the project wasn’t scrapped; not only was the Vietnamese project halted, but the same hydrocarbon exploration block<sup>333</sup> under dispute had been leased to the Hong Kong listed company.<sup>334</sup> While Vietnam could have made a military stand on the issue, as it had in 2014, in this instance it instead deferred to China’s pressure and pulled its assets out of the disputed area; similar instances of deference also occurred in 2019 and 2020.<sup>335</sup> This must also be appreciated in-light of the continued diplomatic relationship between Beijing and Hanoi, which, in order to avoid bi-lateral ratcheting, the latter has maintained a progressive disposition. In late 2023 during a two-day visit to Vietnam by Chinese President Xi (just three months after a visit by the US’ President Biden) ties between the two countries were officially upgraded as Vietnam agreed to join the “community of common destiny”.<sup>336</sup> Afterwards, a release by China’s MOFA stated:

*[Xi said] joint efforts, China-Vietnam ties will enter a new stage of greater political mutual trust, more solid security cooperation, deeper mutually beneficial cooperation, stronger popular support, closer multilateral coordination and better handling of differences...The two countries should firmly support one another on issues concerning each other's core interests and major concerns, and jointly uphold international equity and justice, he said...Maritime disputes are only part of Vietnam-China relations, and it is believed that the two sides can properly handle them in the spirit of mutual trust and mutual respect, Trong said, adding that Vietnam and China share the same idea in safeguarding multilateralism and international fairness and justice, and promoting peace, cooperation and development.*<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> (Ives 2017)

<sup>333</sup> Called block 136-03 by Vietnam and Wanan Bei-21 by China

<sup>334</sup> (Hayton, South China Sea: Vietnam halts drilling after 'China threats' 2017)

<sup>335</sup> (CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2019) (Long 2020)

<sup>336</sup> According to an article by Xinhua News, the official state news agency, the community of common destiny (also referred to in other sources as ‘shared future’) is “The concept of a community of common destiny transcends all sorts of differences in human society and targets greatest possible benefits for all.” (Xinhua 2017)

<sup>337</sup> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023)

However, the move was likely done with less enthusiasm on Vietnam's part than the PRCMOFA would hope to convey. In an interview with VOA, the director of the Southeast Asian Program at CSIS stated that the Hanoi had initially resisted the idea but "ultimately felt it necessary to compromise on this point in order to maintain some stability."<sup>338</sup> This would be in line with the deference concept, wherein a hegemon would coerce a smaller actor, in this case Vietnam, to make public statements regarding amicable relations and cooperation to signal to others, both in the region as well as in the global community, where regional authority lies.<sup>339</sup>

Hegemonic growth can also result in pushback from those under their erstwhile sphere of influence. In China's efforts to gain security dominion over the region there has been noted aversion from the Philippines, whose hot-cold relations between the Duterte and Marcos administrations have demonstrated both deference in the former and resistance in the latter.<sup>340</sup> The contemporary Marcos administration has demonstrated its resistance by revitalizing its security relationship with the US which had largely deteriorated since the 1990s and reached a trough in during the Duterte administration. The EDCA agreement was originally signed in 2014, though was not fully implemented during the Duterte administration due to its attempts to pivot national policy towards a more pro-China standing and a personal enmity towards the US by the president.<sup>341</sup> National policy at the beginning of the Marcos administration however quickly pivoted back towards the United States and breathed new life into the agreement, nevertheless in a move to avert ratcheting with China, released a statement through the Presidential Communications Office that the installations the US was receiving access to would not be used

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<sup>338</sup> (Nguyen 2023)

<sup>339</sup> (Wolf 2022)

<sup>340</sup> (Camba 2023) (Popioco 2023)

<sup>341</sup> (Commander, Philippine Military 2023) (Gomez and Calupitan, Marcos Jr. reaffirms US ties in first 100 days of presidency 2022)

for “offensive actions”.<sup>342</sup> In the build up to the implementation, the Philippine Department of National Defense stated that:

*The Department is committed to accelerate the implementation of the EDCA by concluding infrastructure enhancement and repair projects, developing new infrastructure projects at existing EDCA locations, and exploring new locations that will build a more credible mutual defense posture.*<sup>343</sup>

The EDCA does not permit American forces to be based permanently in the country, rather, it allows the construction and operation of facilities on Philippine bases such as fuel depots, military housing, training sites, and runways which will be used on a rotational basis. The US DoD stated in a release discussing the expansion of EDCA to four new sites that:

*The EDCA is a key pillar of the U.S.-Philippines alliance, which supports combined training, exercises, and interoperability between our forces. Expansion of the EDCA will make our alliance stronger and more resilient, and will accelerate modernization of our combined military capabilities... The addition of these new EDCA locations will allow more rapid support for humanitarian and climate-related disasters in the Philippines, and respond to other shared challenges.*<sup>344</sup>

Addressing “shared challenges” is also mentioned in several points of the 2023 Bilateral Defense Guidelines, though here, there are more direct, yet still diplomatically tactful, references to what are perceived to be regional threats and transgressions by China:

*14. An armed attack in the Pacific, to include anywhere in the South China Sea, on either Philippine or U.S. armed forces – which includes both nations’ Coast Guards – aircraft, or public vessels, would invoke mutual defense commitments under Article IV and Article V of the MDT(mutual defense treaty);*

*16. The United States and the Philippines reaffirm the importance of the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea;*

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<sup>342</sup> (Office of the President of the Philippines, Presidential Communications Office 2023)

<sup>343</sup> (Republic of the Philippines Department of National Defense 2022)

<sup>344</sup> (United States Department of Defense 2023)

*17. The two countries have a common interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight and other lawful uses of the sea, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, as well as open sea lines of communication across the Indo-Pacific region;*

*18. Modernizing air defense capabilities and interoperability to defend Philippine and U.S. sovereign airspace and to ensure freedom of overflight in the Indo-Pacific region remains an alliance priority;<sup>345</sup>*

The EDCA demonstrates that the Philippines has rejected the notion of hegemony by China from a security standpoint, and in light of “daily reports of bellicose activities” by the PLAN and maritime militia, including instances of these craft “removing covers from guns” in intimidation, it is unlikely that the Philippines will re-pivot to Duterte era policies of deference.<sup>346</sup> During an interview with a member of the Philippine government with direct knowledge of security matters in the SCS and Philippine foreign policy, the interviewee stated:

*“China pushed us into the arms of the Americans, we thought China would be benevolent and we [during the Duterte administration] offered a hand of friendship to the PRC, but they really want to be lord over the South China Sea.”<sup>347</sup>*

In turn, the Philippines’ security rapprochement with the United States has had a ratcheting effect on the SCS’s flashpoint. China, as would be expected, opposes EDCA as it poses a clear security threat to both their assets in the SCS, but also is a threat to Chinese forces in the event of a cross-strait conflict with Taiwan or other military adventurism in the region. Amidst the US-Filipino fanfare surrounding the implementation of EDCA, the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines made a statement on China’s perceptions of EDCA, showing that it was viewing developments not only through a regional lens, but also in a wider, global context of their ongoing rivalry with the United States:

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<sup>345</sup> (United States Department of Defense 2023)

<sup>346</sup> (Member of the HOR of the Philippines 2023)

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

*Whereas the U.S. claims that such cooperation is intended to help the disaster relief efforts of the Philippines and some Americans even tout the EDCA sites as driver of local economy, it is plain and simple that those moves are part of the U.S. efforts to encircle and contain China through its military alliance with this country. To bundle the Philippines into the chariots of geopolitical strife will seriously harm Philippine national interests and endanger regional peace and stability. On the South China Sea issue, there is no problem of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. When talking about free and open waterways, what the U.S. has in its mind is actually the freedom of rampage of its warships in the South China Sea. The U.S. military has been coming all the way from the other side of the Pacific to stir up trouble in the South China Sea and ganging up with its allies from other parts of the world to flex muscle in the South China Sea. By doing these, the U.S. has not only heightened tension, driven wedge between China and the Philippines, but also has disturbed and upset the joint effort of countries in this region to safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea.*<sup>348</sup>

It can be theorized that the Philippines is able to reject, rather than defer to China's security hegemony by grace of its geography: while certainly the PRC's artificial islands are security threats and can project power throughout the region, this is limited to strike capabilities rather than full, occupying force projection which would require a significant maritime mobilization, and significant tactical risk, to move ground assets to the archipelago; Vietnam however, who shares a land border with China and a living memory of the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979, must be more cautious due to security threats which would prompt a more strategic deference.<sup>349</sup>

China's rise as a regional hegemon is a consequential factor in the SCS's flashpoint. As its geopolitical power grows both regionally and globally, its capacity to coerce states in the SCS increases in-step; though states might be pressured to publicly kowtow to Beijing in deference, this acts as a ratchet on the flashpoint due to the animosity it creates. However, this does have limitations as is seen in the Philippines boosting its security ties with the United States which was able to reject China's security hegemony, though while this might deter direct kinetic action

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<sup>348</sup> (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines 2023)

<sup>349</sup> (Lavengood, Examining the South China Sea dispute with general morphological analysis 2023, 14-15)

against Filipino assets, it has not proven to dissuade China from continuing its harassment of Filipino ships and outposts in the SCS.<sup>350</sup>

### **6.3 Conclusion**

The SCS's flashpoint is one of the most precarious in the contemporary world-system. Lying on the far edge of the volatility spectrum, it is vulnerable to a number of drivers which compound and reinforce one another to create a complexity of interlocking catalysts; tensions surrounding the flashpoint remain hostile to the point where a single ratcheting event could quickly cascade into ignition and kinetic conflict. Central to this flashpoint is China's growth as a great power and rise to regional hegemony in Southeast Asia. Beijing's inflexibility in its claim to dominion over the SCS, often in the face of international law, and the force by which it is willing to assert this claim, categorically unmatched by others in the region, create an unstable environment where de-escalation appears to be unrealistic for the time being.

As a case study for high volatility flashpoints, the SCS presents an opportunity to survey a region at an impasse, where the likelihood of ignition is discussed openly, often as an inevitability, due to the structural factors which perpetuate its existence. The securitization which has taken place in the SCS by claimants surrounding maritime boundaries, resource rights, and strategic concerns, creates a highly charged regional environment which could push not only the SCS into kinetic conflict, but also draws in powerful extra-regional actors which poses wider risks to international stability.

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<sup>350</sup> (Gomez 2024)

## **7 Catalysts of Conflict: Concluding Remarks**

In times of remarkable geopolitical contention, it is critical to understand the pathways and nuances between disagreement, enmity, and conflict. Flashpoints, particularly those of high volatility, are the greatest threats to international stability and are the most precarious social phenomenon in the world-system. Their capacity to ignite into prolonged periods of kinetic warfare can disrupt decades of socio-economic development, create a reciprocal causation for future conflict, and fracture regional cohesion, in addition to the irrecoverable loss of human life.

As this work has shown, flashpoints are identifiable phenomenon with traceable casual chains and categorizable characteristics for the analysis of individual flashpoints across the world-system, or more broadly as a topic of research. The framework elaborated in the chapters above adds context to nomenclature habitually used in political and academic settings which has only been superficially defined by researched literature. This has been done in an effort to enable more nuanced assessments of geopolitical tension in the world-system and bring structure to discussions of flashpoints as social phenomenon – both by way of their inception as well as the paths taken towards ignition, stagnation, or dissolution. The utility of this is demonstrated by the research advances in the study of crowd disorder's flashpoints discussed in section 4.1, wherein by understanding the root causes and potential triggers of flashpoints at mass gatherings violence between groups can be avoided.

When viewed through the lens of the Copenhagen School's securitization and RSCT, flashpoints appear as constructed regional phenomenon between states, perpetuated by political communities and the patterns of amity and enmity with their neighbors. This work also asserts that by establishing the primary disputes, their perpetuating drivers, and the underlying issues at hand, it is possible to elucidate the most volatile factors in a flashpoint and locate the key pathways to



peace or conflict. As well, it offers insights into bilateral and multilateral relations on the international stage regarding how actors work to mitigate or ratchet tensions surrounding disputes. The nuanced understanding of flashpoints facilitated by this framework enables a more strategic approach to conflict prevention, emphasizing the importance of narrative control and the power of securitizing moves in international diplomacy. Likewise, detailing flashpoints into a system of classifications and presenting 30 unique indicators for diagnostic permits a more structured articulation for academic analysis on these phenomenon. Similar to Waddington's work on crowd disorder's flashpoint, providing a more concrete and elaborated definition of geopolitical flashpoints, and importantly what is not a flashpoint, furnishes policy makers, media, and analysts with guidance to avoid contributing to the speech acts which securitize international issues which lead to flashpoint inception.

Demonstrated above by two case studies of a high and low volatility flashpoint, the typology developed by this dissertation articulates the key drivers of disputes which lead to flashpoint inception. The Arctic demonstrates a low volatility flashpoint wherein the precarious balance between grandstanding, mitigation, and cooperation has coalesced into a stable environment of competition among Arctic states for legitimacy, prestige, and security swagger. It also highlights how geographic factors, such as the hostile climate of the Arctic, can serve to abate tensions which would otherwise become more susceptible to ratcheting. Juxtaposed to the Arctic's balance is the South China Sea flashpoint, where a salience of conflict is reflected in hostile discourse, provocative and violent interactions in disputed waters, and zero-sum rhetoric. It exemplifies flashpoints on the far end of the volatility spectrum where conflict, though not inevitable, is imminent should the actors involved not agree on a pathway towards de-escalation.

This research, though comprehensive in its analysis towards meeting its research goals, has also faced limitations. Methodologically, its reliance on the Copenhagen School, invaluable for its constructivist approach in analyzing securitization and threat perception, by definition leaves analytical findings on the table so to speak from other schools of thought which might approach flashpoints differently. As well, this dissertation has largely focused on state level actors with only cursory mention of non-state actors such as terror groups, independence movements, or other collectives which also have their own dynamics in relation to flashpoints, however this was seen as detracting from the core goals of this work and would be best left to subsequent projects. Finally, this work faced a practical limitation in the number of case studies which were used to apply the flashpoints framework to, while ideally ‘all’ flashpoints could be analyzed, such as was done with Anderson’s *Atlas*, in reality given the confines of a doctoral dissertation it was decided to choose one instance of a high and low volatility flashpoint by which to demonstrate the framework’s utility.

Future research employing this flashpoints framework to new case studies as well as exploring new methodological approaches would be excellent additions to the academic understanding of these phenomena. A fruitful endeavor would be to replace outdated collections of flashpoints, such as Ewan Anderson’s *Atlas of Conflict*, which would expand this typology’s empirical base in addition to exploring a wider array of flashpoints across different geopolitical contexts.

Importantly, investigating the role of non-state actors and the impact of emerging technologies on the securitization process represents another avenue for exploration. A study of historical flashpoints applying this framework would also be a welcome addition, as well, it would likely deepen the understanding of contemporary flashpoints in the process. Further theoretical development is also needed to integrate insights from critical security studies and post-

structuralist approaches, enriching the understanding of flashpoint development as a multifaceted and contested process. Finally, this work's findings can also be applied to other emerging methodologies and techniques within social science, foresight analysis and scenario building for instance; for example, the diagnostic developed in this dissertation can be applied to general morphological analysis for the creation of cross-consistency matrices to analyze hypothetical pathways in flashpoint development.

In closing, this dissertation has worked to fill a deficit in the academic understanding of geopolitical flashpoints as facets of international relations by developing a new framework to analyze these phenomena as topological subjects. Its case studies of the Arctic and of the South China Sea flashpoints have demonstrated the characteristics of flashpoints on both the low and high end of the volatility spectrum, respectively, to showcase the utility of this framework in analyzing contemporary foci of tensions in the world-system. The importance of gaining a deeper understanding of these phenomena cannot be understated; as the global community further integrates, alongside a persistence in developing new methods of warfare and provocation, identifying these flashpoints in their early stages is vital to avoiding conflict.

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